System

A tenth-anniversary issue focused primarily on Paris Fashion Week, as a symbol of the seemingly unending growth of luxury fashion over the past decade.

Featuring 122 industry insiders sharing personal memories, reflections, statements and imagery, and 14 writers, editors, commentators, and creatives in conversation.

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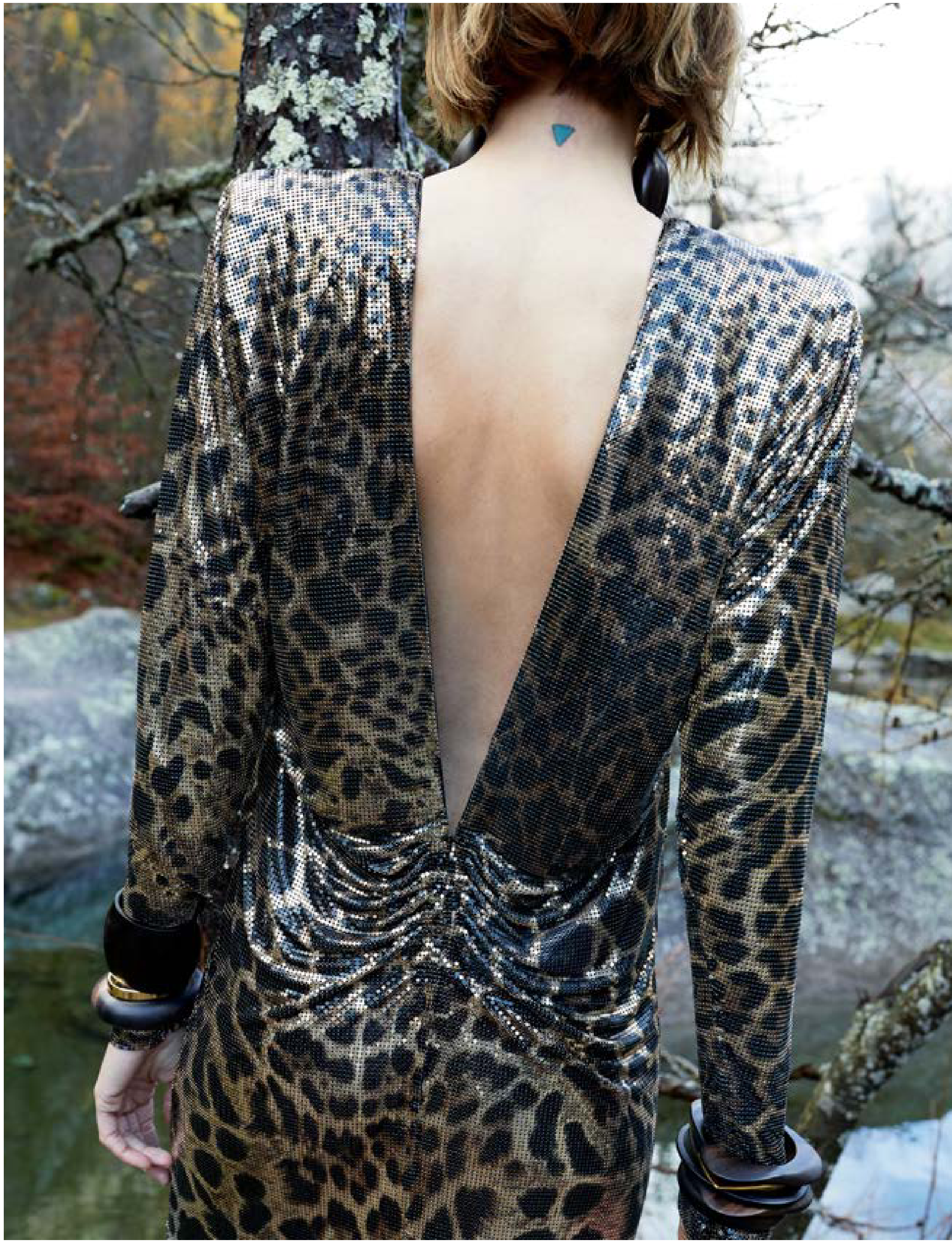

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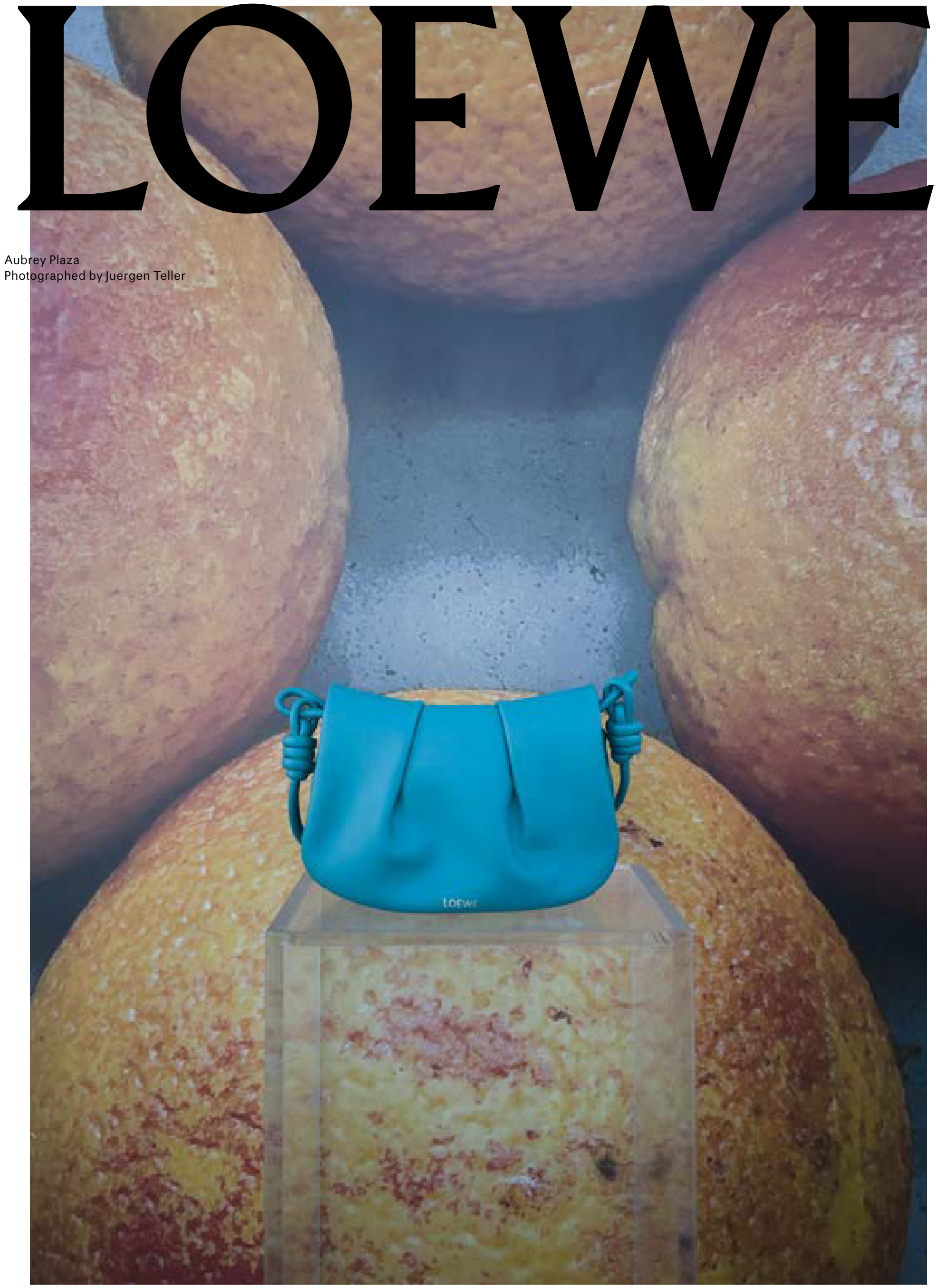
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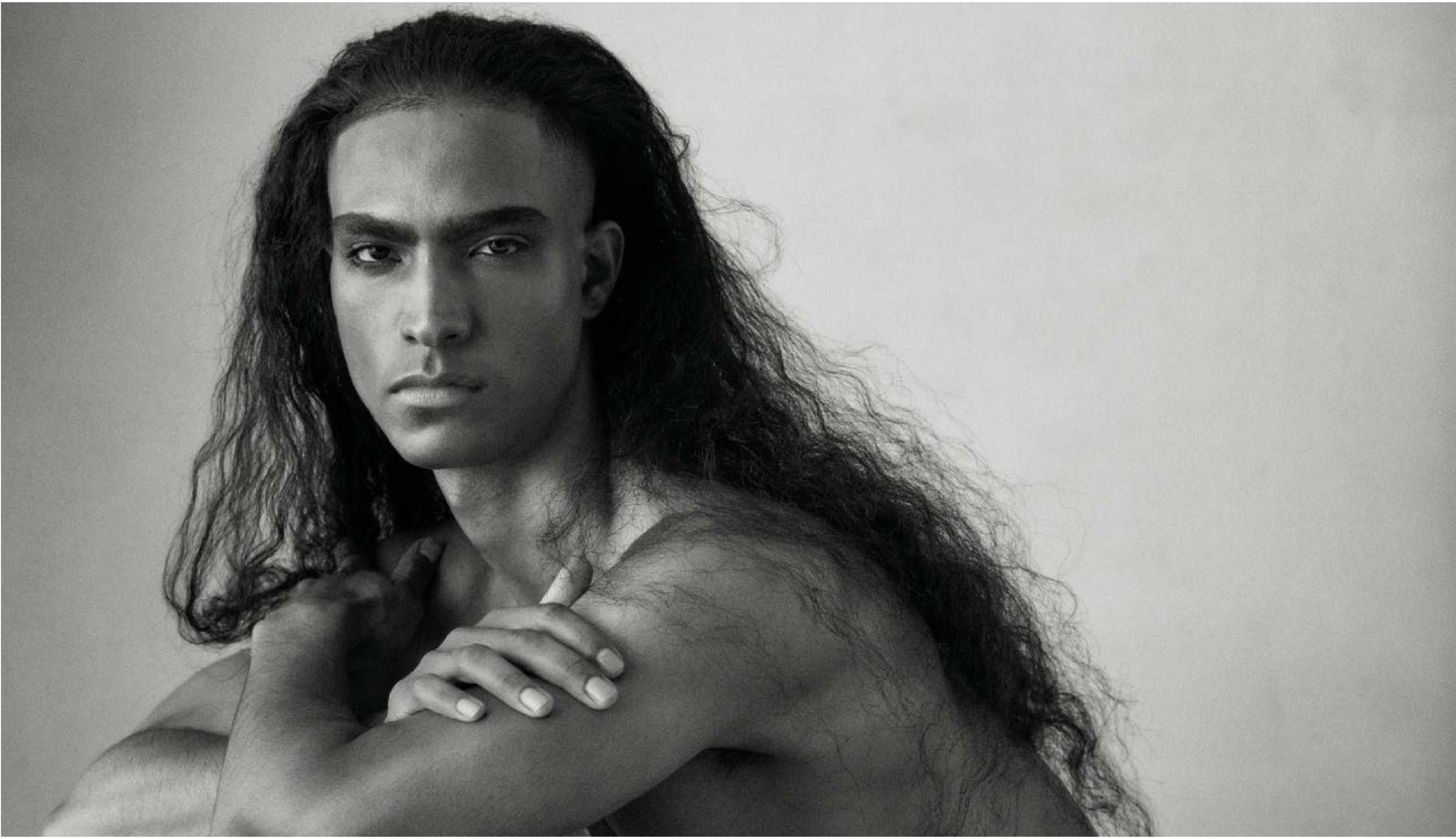

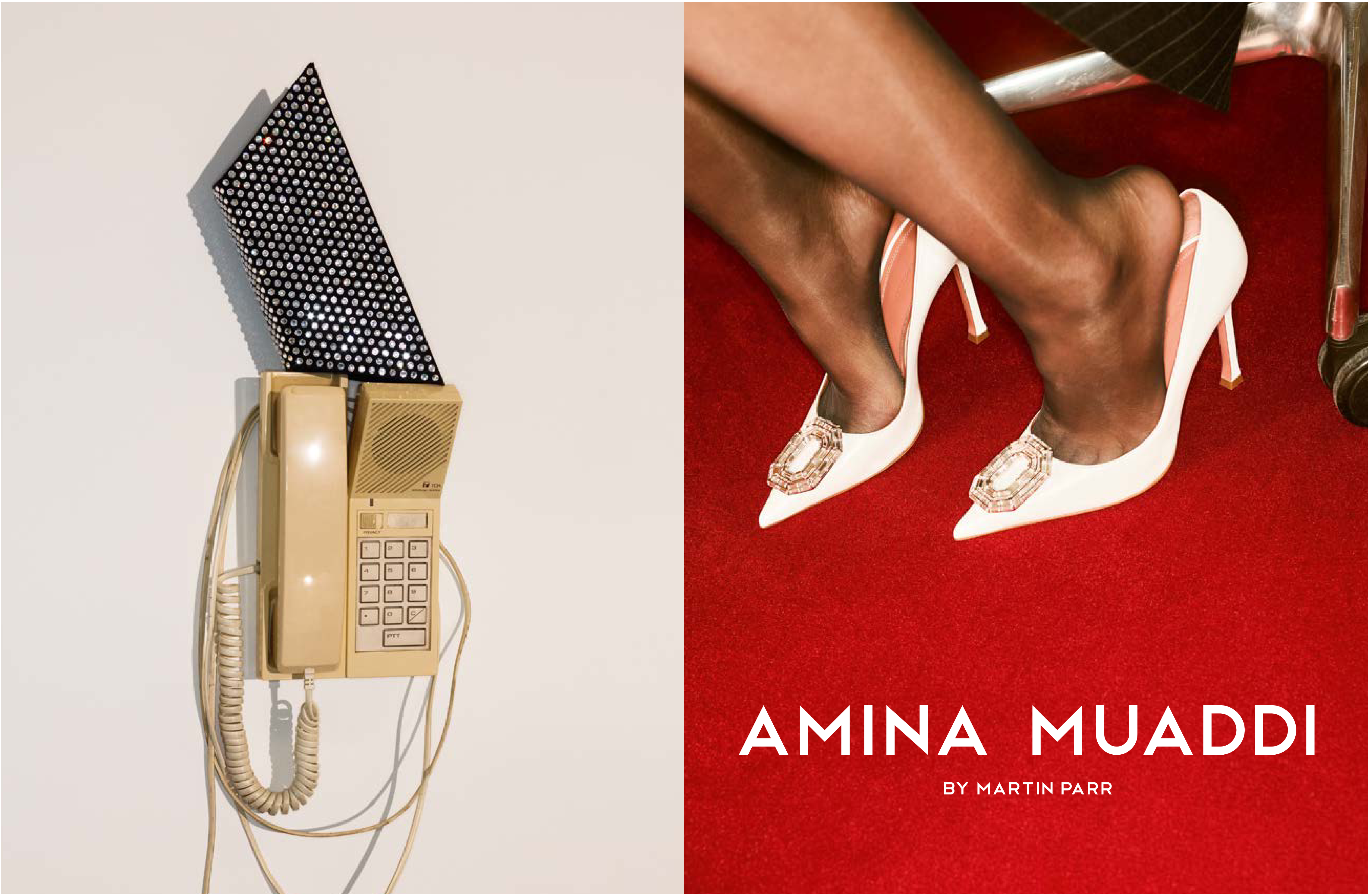
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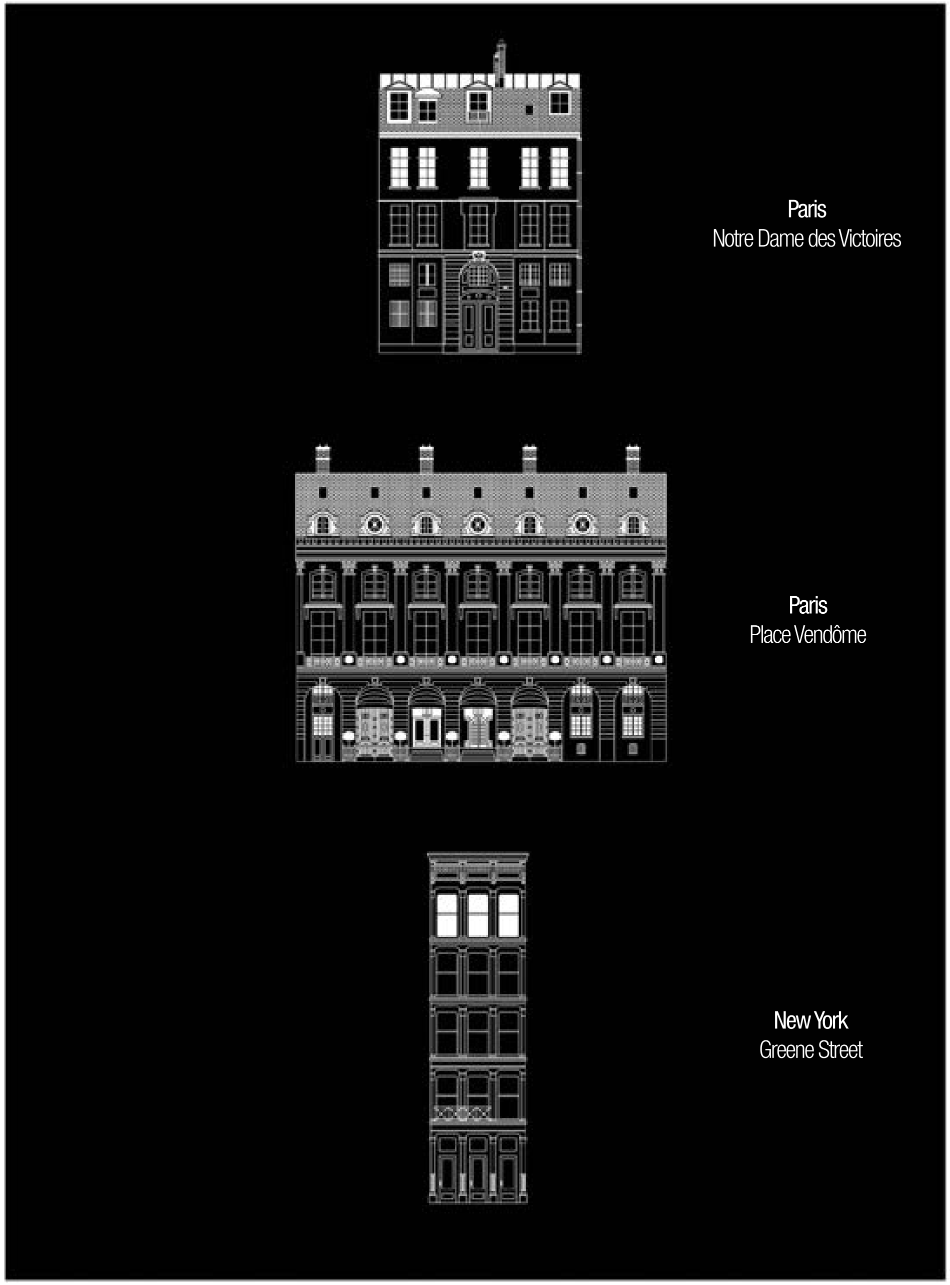

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When we founded *System*, in the spring of 2013, our aim was to document the people, dialogues and culture at the heart of the fashion industry.

We imagined each biannual issue as a kind of ‘deep-thoughts’ time capsule of the season. By using long-form journalism, we wanted to chronicle the designers and CEOs who lead the way, the brands for which they once generated millions and now billions, the creatives shaping how fashion is presented to the world, the next generation of talent striving to break through, and the stories confined to history that seemed worth re-examining.

We wanted *System* to be informative yet conversational. To have a point of view but no agenda. To be a magazine that simply held a mirror up to the many facets of fashion: the inspired, the absurd, the memorable, the instantly forgettable, the historical.

To mark the magazine’s tenth anniversary, we decided to produce an issue focused primarily on Paris Fashion Week, which we saw as a symbol of the seemingly unstoppable growth of luxury fashion over the past decade. It features 122 industry insiders sharing personal memories, reflections, statements and imagery; 14 writers, editors, commentators, and creatives, paired up and in conversation; and a 288-page portfolio of photographs taken by Juergen Teller during Paris Fashion Week between 28 February and 7 March 2023.

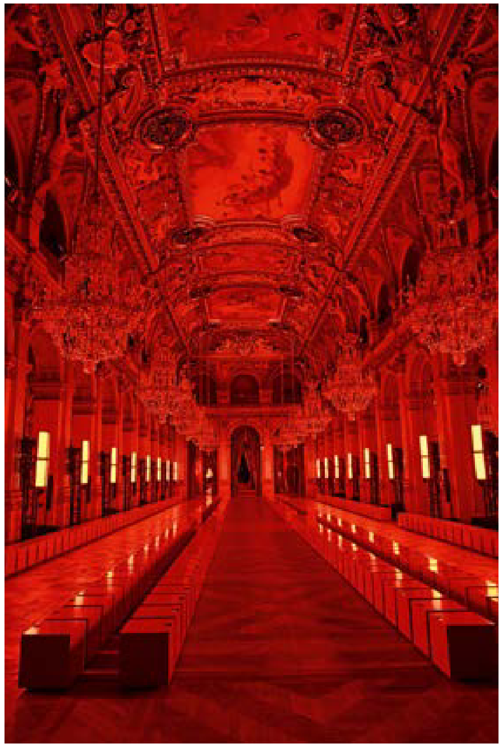
We’d like to thank all of them for their time and their precious contributions, as well as everyone who’s contributed to the magazine over the past decade. *System* only exists because you do.

BOTTEGA VENETA

What was the first Paris Fashion Week show you ever attended?

Featuring 122 industry insiders sharing personal memories, reflections, statements, and imagery.

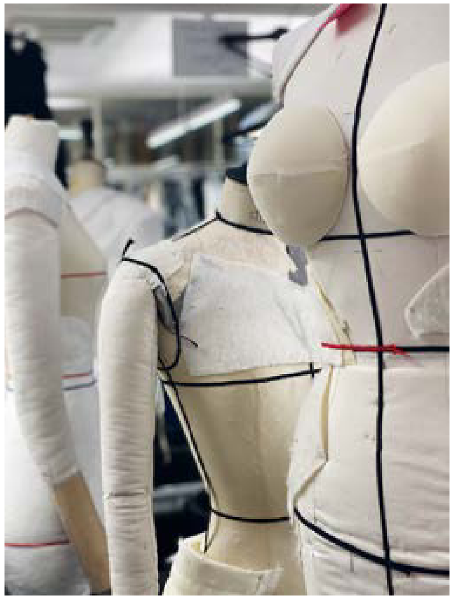
What does Paris Fashion Week represent today?



Sacai Autumn/Winter 2022 show,
Hôtel de Ville, Paris.

Chitose Abe
Designer, Sacai

It's always difficult to speak on behalf of other people, or to generalize about the industry, but for us, we're always working towards Paris, which is challenging but extremely exciting at the same time.



Haider Ackermann
Designer

It was sometime in March 1994 in São Schlumberger's deserted *hôtel particulier*, just off Place Saint-Sulpice. I had somehow heard that John Galliano was going to be presenting a 17-piece collection. I remember nervously running through the city to get to the location and begging this handsome man – who later became a friend, Mr Robert Ferrell – to please let me in. After much hesitation and thanks to my sheer persistence, I was allowed inside this intimate space where as far as I can recall the light was coming from the outside like early morning Northern Lights. Christy, Linda, Kate, Nadja wandered the space, flirting with the few tremendously lucky guests. It was like an old salon presentation in its faded grandeur – and it was utterly magical! I had never seen such heavenly creatures. My heart started racing and silently hidden in the corner I observed the fall of the kimonos' fabrics, the endless elegant legs of Nadja in stockings, the slip dresses, the tuxedos, the obis, the bubblegum. John made me believe in dreams that day.

The intimacy of the previous *défilé* I described – without being nostalgic – is something I do miss nowadays at Paris Fashion Week. Just because it gave me such chills and a shock! You could focus solely on the grandeur of the clothes and for the duration of the show believe that nothing else mattered.

Osman Ahmed
Fashion features director, *i-D*

The first proper time I went to Paris for the shows – rather than as an assistant or working on a shoot or just for the day – was about eight or nine years ago. It felt like it took *years* to get there, even if it was only two hours away. Every moment of my career had been leading to this moment. I had no money, barely enough to cover the Eurostar from London, and I stayed at a friend's place, which was totally out of the city. It probably wasn't even in Paris, but there was a Monoprix, which is where I bought most of my meals. It took about an hour to get anywhere, and a lot of pre-planning (I feel like there were no apps to guide you around the city back then), so I was on foot, conscious of every penny I spent. Paris is where fashion happens, sort of like the Emerald City of fashion. I remember seeing the Dior store on Avenue Montaigne and tripping out: this is where Dior showed his New Look! That was Balenciaga's atelier! This is where Avedon photographed Suzy Parker! This is where John Galliano staged his 'Princess Lucretia' show! Up to that point, I never had time to take it all in, that everything I had learned from books and magazines was right there in front of me.

I remember going to the Vetements show at Le Dépôt, the slightly seedy gay club. How I got in is beyond me; I think a friend helped. It was one of those turning points. This was not Avenue Montaigne, but it was symbolically what Paris is all about: a city where designers can create their own universes. The show was crucial to changing my own ideas and perceptions of fashion: it opened with Gosha [Rubchinskiy] in the DHL T-shirt, which felt like such a divisive talking point (in hindsight, probably one of the first 'viral' moments, and so ahead of the curve). Then there was the unusual casting; the spliced cut of the jeans (a precursor to upcycling); Kanye on the front row; and the sticky floors and saloon doors. It was a big deal that Carine Roitfeld was there; it felt like the last gasp of this super-underground label before it hit the mainstream. This was fashion as I had never seen it, which is why I came to Paris. It said something about the world, about my generation and our relationship to clothes and imagery, about the era that we're living in, and became a prophetic oracle of how much the internet would change our interactions with fashion and clothes. It forced you to reconsider your own wardrobe and teetered that fine line between sincerity and irony. Later that night, I also got into the after-party. It was wild. I couldn't believe the glass box with floor lighting and people smoking inside. Someone offered me poppers; I accepted. I snogged some boys, marvelled at Lotta Volkova snogging a girl. I don't remember much, apart from seeing so many designers I knew from London – Paris is perhaps the most international fashion capital, even if it's not the most diverse in day-to-day life. I stayed up all night and missed my Eurostar back to London the next morning. It felt like the end of the world, a total disaster because I had no money to buy a new ticket. In a way, it was; my whole world had changed. I've been coming back to Paris for shows ever since.

Today, Paris is sort of like Disneyland with its characters in costumes, its crowds of tourists, its dizzying rollercoasters of shows, its legends and folkloric stories and symbols. Before, shows were like artful installations, heavy on concept and storytelling through music, set, casting. Everything was subtler. I remember being taught to take notes and draw the clothes as they came down the catwalk, and trained to decipher what a lipstick could indicate about a reference or what movie the music was referencing. Once, my editor sent me on a mission to do a story during the shows about longer skirt lengths, and I interviewed a million editors and buyers about the more 'prudent' mood – this was only about a decade ago, but it feels like a world away! Now, you feel dizzy at shows; there's so much going on that it's almost impossible to focus on the clothes. The crowds are gargantuan, and sometimes you wonder why these kids aren't at school. Then again, I used to bunk off classes to crash fashion shows, too, but the biggest change is what those crowds are there for: it's definitely not the clothes, but rather which pop stars are there. We all become iPhone-wielding zombies, ready to capture every look and arrival without even thinking. I remember walking into a huge show last season – the biggest yet from one luxury brand – and just being squashed by security. Unless you're a celebrity, you have to have your wits about you to avoid getting whacked by a camera rig. My colleague and I just looked at each other, and she muttered, 'This is some fucked-up shit.' We needed to lie down in total silence after that show.

Paris is still the epicentre of fashion and it's where the real 'fashion moments' often happen – by that I mean those magical moments where everything comes together and you're left amazed by a show and all of its components. These days, it feels like a fever dream because there's so much going on. The early groggy mornings bashing out copy on the shows; the multiple coffees required to wake up for the first show; the endless filming for social media; the increasingly frenzied schedule and crowds; the preposterous scale of every show; and the constant distractions from the clothes, and of course, the late nights hopping around all the increasingly mandatory extracurricular dinners and parties. But it can also be home to wonderful experiences in your career. I've cried at fashion shows, often in Paris, and I've made some of my best friends from the hours spent sitting with them at shows, dinners, and appointments. This is the place where you can have actual conversations about clothes with people who really care about design, conversations about the evolution of a designer's work, about the imagery and features that we're all creating throughout the year – and of course, you can always bond over complaining about the weather, the traffic, or how late shows start. At its best, Paris can feel like a club for all the geeks and freaks who finally made it to prom. If you can make it here, you're the real deal.

CAFE DE LA MAI

Emmanuelle Alt
Stylist

The first show I ever went to was Jean Paul Gaultier at the beginning of the nineties. Back in the day, Jean Paul showed at La Villette. It created this wild buzz and everyone wanted to be there – with or without an invitation. Inside, it was more concert than fashion show. The atmosphere was electric and profoundly joyous. Each show was an unexpected event, edgy, and extremely inspiring and surprising.

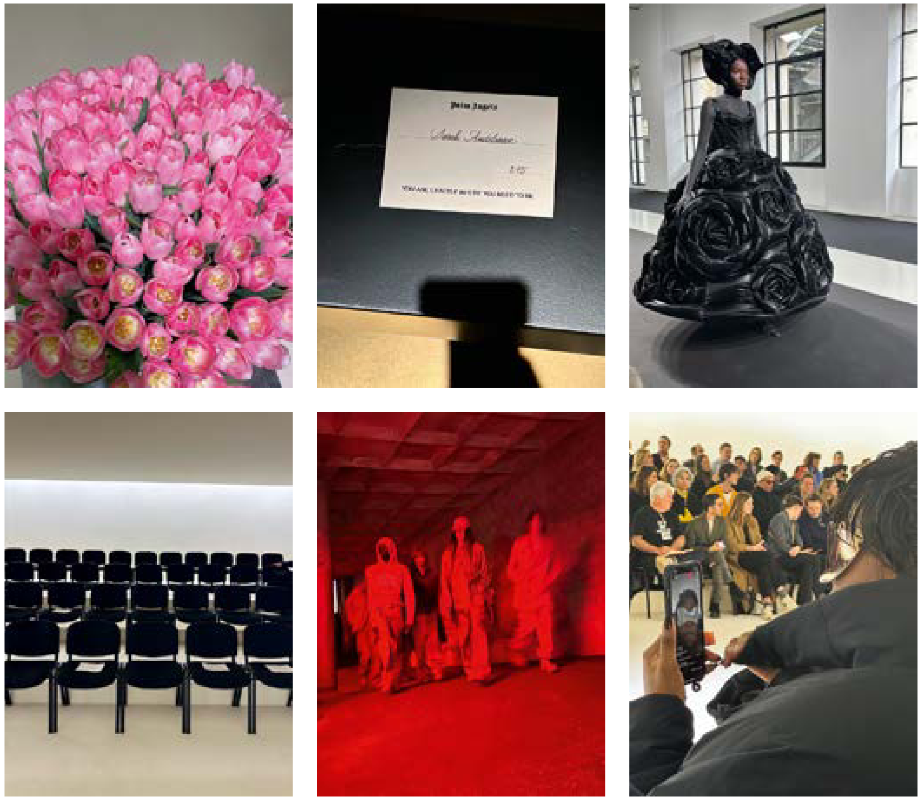
Paris Fashion Week has its own unique place and position because Paris is the capital of fashion. It is a boundless playground for creativity. While the luxury industry dominates, and the big brands' shows offer a wide range of creativity and large-scale scenography, Paris Fashion Week still manages to support young designers and offer them real visibility. On the same day, you can see wildly different shows, at opposite ends of the spectrum, but equally inspiring.

'Three photos I took in February 2006 during the Giambattista Valli show, the first I ever saw in Paris.'

Imran Amed
Founder and CEO, The Business of Fashion

My first season at Paris Fashion Week was in February 2006. The first two shows I attended were Giambattista Valli and Charles Anastase. I didn't have a seat for Giambattista Valli, but my new friends Mesh Chhibber and Olivier Bourgis let me in to watch. I stood at the back, against the wall, and I remember being curious about all the people there, what their jobs were, and how the whole choreography of a fashion show happened. I had a big camera with me to take photos; this was before the iPhone, so having a camera as an attendee was pretty unusual. Later that evening, I uploaded some of the photos to my private blog that was password protected and didn't yet have a name!

Paris has emerged as the true global capital of fashion. It is where the most creative designers show their collections, whether they are from France, Belgium, Japan, India or the UK. It is where the business of fashion happens in showrooms spread across the city. Importantly, it is also where the global fashion community gathers each season sharing knowledge, information and yes, sometimes a little gossip, on everything that is going on. It is equal parts exhilarating and exhausting, and I love it and feel privileged to be a part of it.



Sarah Andelman
Creative consultant and publisher, Just An Idea

We opened colette in March 1997, so I started going regularly to shows from September and October 1996. It wasn't the very first show I saw, and not in Paris, but one very strong memory is the Alexander McQueen Spring/Summer 1999 show with the live painting by machines on Shalom Harlow. I remember it could have started two or three hours late but that was normal; after a moment like that, you really feel that you've lived something memorable forever. Another show that touched me, in Paris, was Junya Watanabe's Spring/Summer 2000, so it must have been in 1999, with the rain falling on the catwalk to show the collection was waterproof. It was so incredible, this rain 'from nowhere', and the combination of music, hair, make-up, made everything so special. There was something funny in the collection about the contrast of something very futuristic with the colours, the 'galaxy' on the models' heads, and the sixties flowers like wallpaper on some prints. In general, I'm so grateful to have attended all these fantastic shows.

Today we all have our iPhones out: we take pictures during the show; we film during the finale (looking at the image on our iPhone instead of the real show), as if we were the only one doing it, as if my angle might be better than yours. Then we all share it quickly after (if not during) the show. I don't know why, but here it is, our new obsession… Perspectives changed, the messages changed – is it still about creativity? Is it more about entertainment? Luxury for me is the most subtle thing, something that nobody knows except you – and I'm not sure where it is during Paris Fashion Week.

Loewe Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 womenswear show.

Courtesy of LOEWE.

Jonathan Anderson
Creative director, Loewe, founder and creative director, JW Anderson

The very first Paris Fashion Week show I ever saw was Alexander McQueen's last show [Spring/Summer 2010]. A friend and I managed to blag our way in. In hindsight you realize it was the beginning of a new era and the end of another.

Over the past ten years I've seen first-hand how much Paris Fashion Week has become part of popular culture. The power of the Paris Fashion Week brand has really transformed luxury fashion and culture at large.

Winner of the 2023 LVMH Prize, Setchu by Satoshi Kuwata, 7 June 2023.

Delphine Arnault
Chairman and chief executive officer, Christian Dior Couture

The first show that really had an impact on me and that I will always remember was John Galliano's first *défilé* for Dior at the Grand Hôtel, Rue Scribe, unveiling the Dior Spring/Summer 1997 haute-couture collection. Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the house, Galliano paid homage to the most emblematic Dior fundamentals: from the passion for gardens and the beauty of flowers to the eternal elegance of Christian Dior's muse Mitzah, through the reinvention of the idea of couture and femininity. It was an iconic show strong in creativity and emotion.

Paris Fashion Week is a very special, magical moment for Dior, whose history has been absolutely linked to that of Paris ever since the house's first show in February 1947. This collective effervescence and energy, which springs to life and flourishes vibrantly for a few days and is reborn with each season, perpetually spurs us on to write new chapters of the Dior dream, through ever-surprising and enchanting set designs, such as Joana Vasconcelos's monumental installation for the Dior Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 ready-to-wear *défilé*. Paris – which was at the heart of Maria Grazia Chiuri's inspiration for that collection – continues to shine with this totally unique aura, an incomparable magnetic force, attracting the most cutting-edge, inventive and demanding fashion world. Dior is more than ever one of the key players in this ultra-desirable scene, where art and excellence, heritage and audacity, present and future, glamour and exceptional craftsmanship are united in a captivating dialogue.

Marc Ascoli
Art director

One of the first shows I attended, my earliest memory at least, was Comme des Garçons' first show in Paris. It took place at the Hôtel de Crillon, Place de la Concorde, back in the early eighties. I don't remember how I ended up there but I remember vividly what I felt right after. I knew it was a pivotal moment in fashion and that from that moment onwards fashion would take a new turn. Rei Kawakubo was a real game changer and this show was the definition of that. I have flashbacks of specific details: colours, black, a mix of blue china, and prints that made me think of Ozu movies. In my memory there was no music. The avant-garde touch of the collection against the luxurious, yet unrenovated decor of the setting was very striking and so well thought out. The clash, the daring contrast, makes it memorable to this day.

Paris Fashion Week remains the most important event for the fashion industry. It's the moment for eccentricity that gives room to new perspectives and different viewpoints. All of a sudden your calendar is full and the race against the clock starts. You have to be here and there, and you're fighting against the idea of not missing out. Coming from someone who has attended decades of Parisian fashion shows, I feel there's always been a dizzying side to it. Yet in a post-Covid time of environmental awareness, there seems to be a slight contradiction as we see the event's constant expansion. It might be getting a little out of proportion, but it undeniably remains a great form of excitement (to be consumed with moderation, of course!).

‘Michelle Elie is one of those unique personalities who does not care about opinions, trends or rules of dressing. She follows her instinct and heart, which she expresses in the way she dresses. I always smile when she arrives at a fashion show – which is what fashion should make you feel.’

Imruh Asha
Stylist

It was a Vetements show, Autumn/Winter 2016, in the American Cathedral on Avenue George V. I actually sneaked into the show as I was just starting in the industry so obviously not on the press list. I used Alex Sossa’s name, who I didn’t know then. While I was inside I started Googling him and figured out what he looked like. Luckily I did not sit in his seat otherwise the press team might have kicked me out! I actually met Alex a little while ago and told him this story, and we laughed about it. It was the prime era of Vetements: the collection was super strong and there were a lot of famous people.

Paris is where fashion was born (and will probably die). Paris Fashion Week is the epicentre of all the fashion weeks because the big luxury houses are all based here. When it’s fashion week here you can feel it and see it so well. You will see all the different characters popping up on every street corner in the Marais and other parts of Paris!

Rami Atallah
Co-founder and CEO, Ssense

It must have been Comme des Garçons circa 2008. Rei’s shows are always intimate and esoteric art performances and seeing them in person gives you a different dimension of her vision and craft.

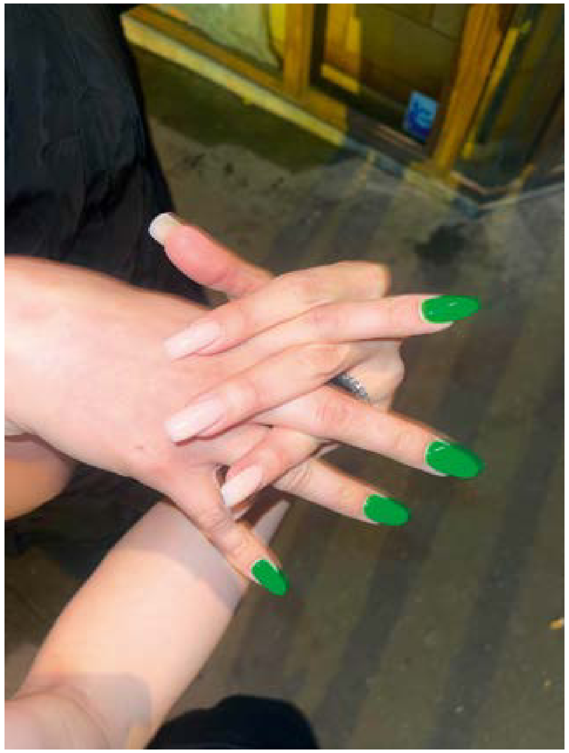
Paris Fashion Week has been the most consistent and important. It’s arguably the only moment of the season that brings the whole industry together and reflects the mood of what’s going on in the world.

j'aime ...

Agnès b.
Founder and designer, agnès b.

My friend Jean-Charles de Castelbajac's fashion show in 1982. A magnificent memory is Yves Saint Laurent's final show at the Centre Pompidou in 2002 – an absolutely sublime show revisiting his entire career!

In my opinion, today's Paris Fashion Week is increasingly becoming a commercial event, whereas in the beginning, it was a very chic, unique and intimate occasion. When I was young, I was lucky enough to attend a Chanel show in Coco Chanel's presence in her salons; I saw her sitting on the steps surrounded by models in suits and dresses that fell so beautifully! There was something sensual, calm, and very elegant about her work. These days, unfortunately, there's too much at stake on the commercial side of things; it's becoming a real show where the fans wait outside, et cetera. I'm not going! For several years now, I've mainly been making films to show my collections. In the end, I think it's more appropriate and more environmentally friendly. I'm not into luxury; I'm into quality, loyalty and respect. I never do anything over the top, and because I don't like fashion, I don't make things that go out of fashion!



Franziska Bachofen-Echt
Casting director

We were in the middle of a war. I had broken my leg and it was difficult for me to walk. I have never really understood how they build those kinds of sets. Not even spectacular, just beyond human understanding. This time it was a 360-degree aquarium filled with snow. The wind was so strong that some of the models must have fallen during the first rehearsal, so they had reduced the power of the wind machines. From a distance, a Kardashian emerged almost from nowhere, *saucissonée* – pardon my French – in a dress made only of tape. She looked like she was trying to escape from something, but was hampered. A bit like those people walking in the snow with their belongings in trash bags into the wind, escaping war. I suddenly felt really emotional. It was Balenciaga Autumn/Winter 2022 – and I will never forget it.

Courtney Love said something funny when asked about Paris Fashion Week and how she was only in the city during these kind of Vendôme castle of late-stage capitalism moments, with rich people who she didn't want to be around. But there are a lot of cool protests and union protests at the moment, and the French really get into that. For me, it's always a pleasure to see my friends from all around the world: for one week only everybody is in the same place. Fashion is the beating heart of the *société du spectacle*, so I don't expect anything else. Yes, postmodernism after postmodernism, but can we really blame the luxury industry for that? We are all to blame. We live consciously outside any tangible reality and, honestly, I really don't mind as long as I can have my 'breakfast with my loved ones at the Ritz'. Perhaps a bit selfish, but at least I'm aware of what's going on.

Lamine Badian Kouyaté
Designer, XULY.Bët

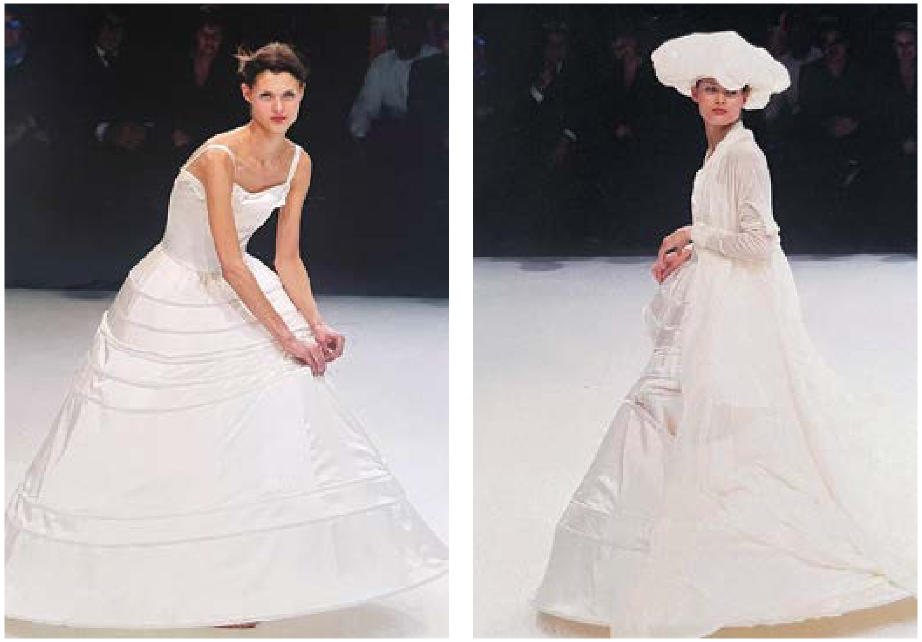
I can instantly remember my first Paris Fashion Week show – it was Jean Paul Gaultier. I can't recall exactly the year or season, but it must be 1988 or 1989. It inspired me a lot. What I remember most from this experience is that it was so difficult to get into a fashion show back then; I had a friend who worked at Peclers – a trends agency – so we had fake invitations to be able to get in! We were ready to do anything!

For me, Paris Fashion Week is still incredibly relevant. It is welcoming. It welcomes people, designers. I believe that it makes France shine. In a way we are lucky to have these big establishments that inject funds and means so that it can still be inspiring and important. It's an institution that says a lot about fashion today.

Fabien Baron
Creative director and founder, Baron & Baron

My very first fashion show, I was 18 years old, fresh out of art school, was Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche in 1979. I was assisting their in-house photographer, who was assigned to shoot press pictures directly from the runway. We both had front row seats, smack in the middle, and my jobs were to hold a large flash unit with a small umbrella directed at the models, and to reload the cameras with fresh film. I remember I was petrified by the idea that I would mess up and ruin a roll of film. Two seats away from me, I recognized Andy Warhol; he looked just like the pictures I had seen of him. Little did I know that I would take over *Interview* magazine years later. Of course, in hindsight, the whole room was filled with glamorous editors and personalities, but I had no idea who any of them were! I had never been to a show before. Everything seemed to go by so fast, but I was immediately taken by the perfection that surrounded me: the clothes, the models, their attitude, the audience, all that glamour and beauty. The whole experience spoke to me and millions of images flashed in front of my eyes. It was so inspiring and a revelation; I could not help but fall in love with it all and I kept that experience close to me for years. It would take another 10 years, when I was working with Franca Sozzani at Italian *Vogue*, for me to be sitting in a fashion show again. This time I was quite a few rows back! It wasn't until 1992, when I became creative director at *Harper's Bazaar*, that I finally secured my next front row seat, next to Liz Tilberis.

Paris Fashion Week is the most prestigious fashion event today. Paris has always been home to the most renowned and luxurious fashion houses and designers, as well as haute couture. Today, LVMH and Kering dominate the industry. The city has developed a uniquely skilled workforce, and talented young designers from around the world have been flooding into the Paris-based brands' design studios, their fresh vision and streetwear influence updating classic designs. Megabrands like Dior, Chanel, and Saint Laurent, have become great entertainment machines, with fashion shows becoming increasingly elaborate and extravagant, reminiscent of the Oscars, with fans behind barricades screaming, and personalities, artists, performers, and activists making up their front rows. With magazines no longer the gatekeepers of fashion, we've all turned to social media and other online platforms for fashion content. The rise of influencer marketing and the proliferation of fashion blogs have challenged the traditional authority of fashion magazines, pushing brands to become their own media channels and communicate directly to consumers. It's direct and refreshing. It's also inspiring to see the French government investing in the fashion industry, with initiatives aimed at supporting new designers and promoting sustainable fashion. This is one of the ways the pandemic has presented Paris with an opportunity to reimagine the fashion industry and lead the charge towards a more sustainable and ethical future. It's an exciting moment in the history of fashion.

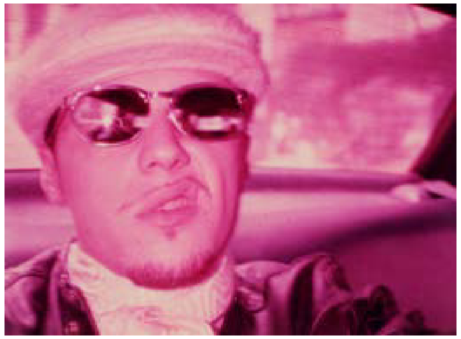


Malgosia Bela at the Yohji Yamamoto show, October 1998.

Malgosia Bela
Model and actress

October 1998, my first Paris Fashion Week. Yamamoto's show is held in a theatre. I step onstage, barefoot, in a simple white dress. Suddenly the music stops. With trembling hands I unzip the hidden pockets and magic up a pair of shoes, shoulder-length gloves, a floor-length coat, a giant hat, and even a bouquet of flowers. With the help of two Japanese assistants, Cinderella transforms into a bride.

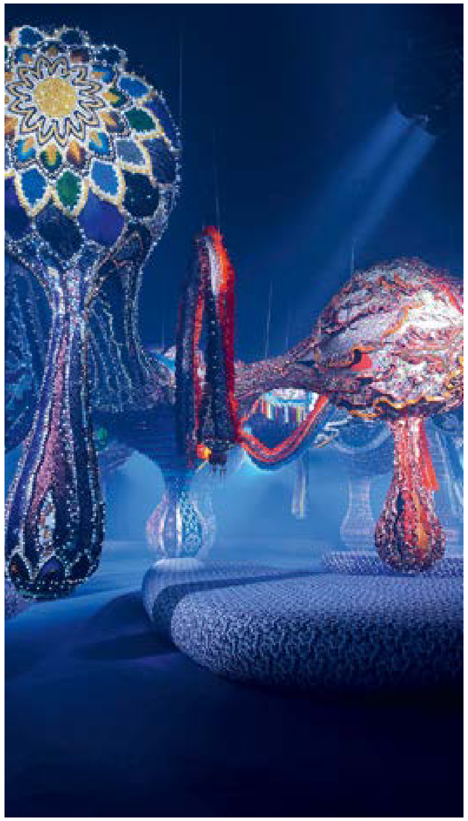
Today I feel Paris Fashion Week has regained its rightful place and importance. The atmosphere and excitement remind me very much of the late nineties when I was starting out and Paris was the epicentre of the fashion industry.



Alexandre de Betak
Founder and creative director, Bureau Betak

The Bureau Betak office opening and the Sybilla Paris opening show and party – 1990. The start of a longggggg and crazy journey that's never stopped being amazing.

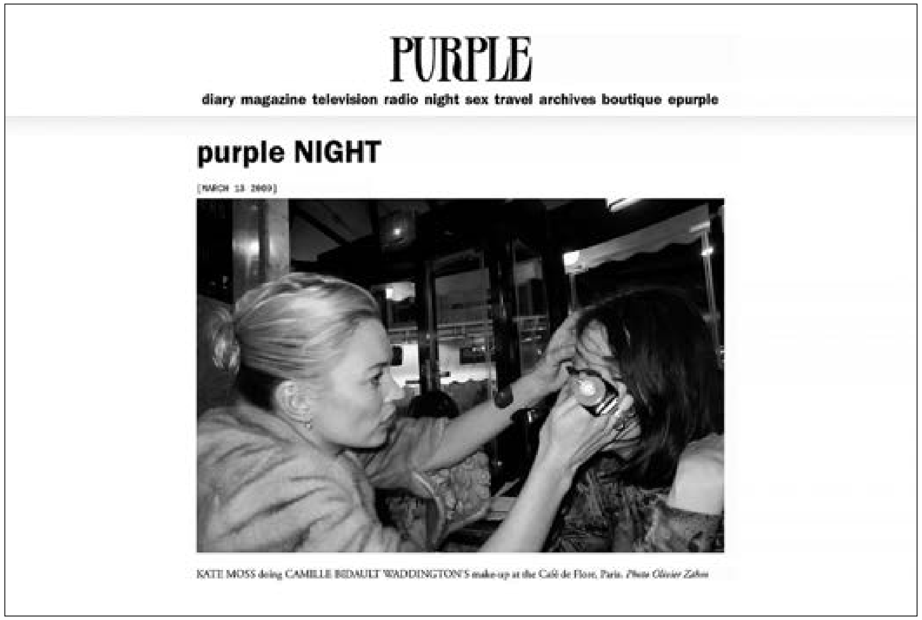
Over 30 years later, over 1,500 shows by Betak later, Paris Fashion Week is longer, larger, fuller… and hopefully we don't just do more, but also crazier and even better!



Olivier Bialobos
Deputy managing director in charge of global communication and image, Dior

My first Paris Fashion Week was a long time ago, when I was still a student and had a job greeting guests at shows, for a bit of pocket money. I was lucky enough to witness some intense fashion moments, like Naomi Campbell's first *défilé* with Azzedine Alaïa; Diana Ross performing at Thierry Mugler's show; the first-ever show by John Galliano for his eponymous brand; Issey Miyake's poetic *défilés*; and Alexander McQueen's incredibly powerful ones. My favourite moment is the day that precedes the show, when the stage is set before the madness of the *défilé*. I find myself with Maria Grazia, just the two of us, alone on the set, ready to share this privileged ritual, before the crazy effervescence of the next day.

Paris remains the capital of fashion, now more than ever before, with its fashion weeks where the most prestigious houses express themselves alongside young designers. These are unique moments of creativity geared towards reinventing desire and getting customers to dream, there and then, but also all over the world, thanks to social networks that allow you to follow the inspiring magic live.



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[MARCH 13 2009]

KATE MOSS doing CAMILLE BIDAULT WADDINGTON'S make-up at the Café de Flore, Paris. *Photo Olivier Zahm*

Camille Bidault-Waddington
Stylist

My first fashion show was Comme des Garçons menswear in 1992; it was dark and atmospheric. I was a little scared, but very inspired.

Paris Fashion Week in 2023 seems more of a circus. I like all the dressed-up students in front of the shows; inside, it is more a sort of duty-free world, but sometimes you catch something fun.

'Me and Coco Chanel's sofa.'

Derek Blasberg
Writer

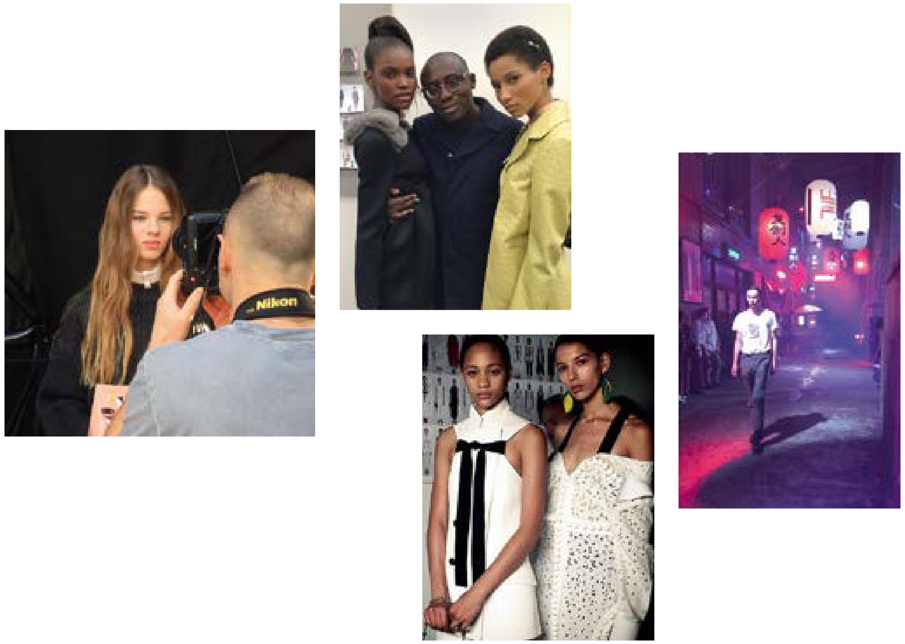
I can tell you that the first show I went to I was definitely not invited. So the first fashion memory I have from Paris is when I 'borrowed' a friend's ticket and went to a John Galliano for Dior show in maybe 2003? 2004? 2002? About twenty years ago.

Paris Fashion Week today? I think Paris will ultimately always be the laboratory of fashion. This is where all the trends are born, where they're started, and where they go from runway to reality, baby.

Saskia de Brauw
Model

In 2011 I left for New York, fresh from Amsterdam, book under my arm, high heels in my backpack, trying to understand how to navigate as fast as possible the NY grid to do my castings for my very first show season. I finally got booked for one show, Reed Krakoff, cast by James Scully. I was so nervous I could hardly keep upright. Then I left for the City of Light where I saw other casting directors and was booked for Balenciaga with Nicolas Ghesquière, my hair dyed raven black by Guido Paulo. I was placed third in the line up. The first three of us being 'new faces' were described in the press as 'street cast', which was of course a lovely myth. It was here I suddenly saw how modelling could be a tool to transform and tell stories. I learned slowly but surely to give in and play along with the fantasies of our industry's most creative minds.

When I started a little more than 10 years ago, social media was not yet an important tool. It did feel – but I might be mistaken – that we could focus more on the experience. In my memory, at the end of the show people stood up and applauded, yelled, shouted joyfully. Today, when I do the finale in line with the other models there is hardly any sound except the sound of the music. I see a sea of iPhones lifted in front of people's faces. I wonder at times why we are all here sharing time and space when time and space are no longer relevant? We stand in line waiting for celebrities to arrive, watching them enter the venue on a screen backstage. They have their picture taken while we wait in high heels, having our make-up retouched a thousand times, with the occasional girl fainting from the uncomfortable clothes she is wearing for too long. Most surprising of all is seeing the same look on a girl standing in line not far from me worn by a celebrity I spot on the screen. Reality and play are mixed in a confusing kind of way.

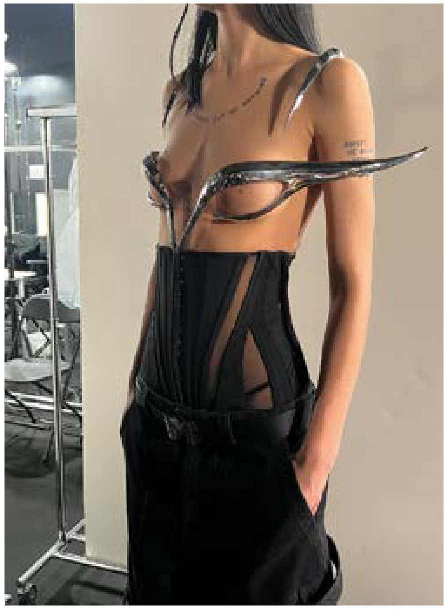


Clockwise from left: Juergen backstage at Louis Vuitton. Prada womenswear, 2015 – Lineisy's first show.
Raf Simons, July 2017. Selena's first Proenza show.

Ashley Brokaw
Casting director

My first Paris Fashion Week show was a Versace couture show in 1999. I was working for Steven Meisel and we flew over for the show and to shoot the collection afterwards. I remember some of the dresses were made from stingray, so they couldn't travel to the US, which is why we had to go to Paris. There were bustiers made with what looked like leather, but when it caught the light it had this beautiful iridescence. The show was in the basement of the Ritz – they had put a floor down over the swimming pool for the runway. I was wide-eyed! The collection was incredible and the experience of the show was such a rush. Over in 12 minutes. I remember it was Kate Moss's 25th birthday that night and Donatella threw her a big party at Les Bains. It was such an epic night. We shot the collection in the days after at a chateau outside Paris with no heat… in January. It was a black-and-white campaign and it was incredible to be able to see the clothes up close and the detail of the dyed stingray. A once in a lifetime experience.

Paris Fashion Week is really the pinnacle of show weeks. I think it still represents today what it has always represented – the height of luxury. I always feel the build-up to Paris Fashion Week and I think expectations are always higher in Paris. While the number of shows on the calendar has increased over the years, and some would argue that quantity has slowly taken over quality, I love the diversity of brands we see there. The chasm between a show like Chanel and an offering like Rick Owens is vast, but they both are key to the luxury landscape. I also don't think there is anything identifiable to a Paris fashion show. There is no formula or plug-in model that you can sometimes find in other cities. The fact that you have brands like Sacai and Saint Laurent and Loewe and Miu Miu that don't feel adjacent to each other in any way speaks volumes of the power of the creativity in Paris. I always marvel at how different each one of the shows I work on feels. It's very inspiring going into all these different worlds within one city.



'A photo from my phone camera roll taken backstage during the last show, Autumn/Winter 2022-2023, featuring our house muse, Lidia, wearing the 3D-printed chrome bra, with corset shorts.'

Casey Cadwallader
Creative director, Mugler

The first fashion show that I ever went to in Paris was Dior couture by John Galliano. My friend was working the door and snuck me in. My most vivid memories of it are the set, and how the models had to walk up a staircase at the end, which wasn't easy in the high heels they were wearing. At the end when John did his bow, he was flanked by four security guards; I thought that was the coolest thing I had ever seen.

Paris Fashion Week in some ways is what it has always been, the centre of fashion, and where everyone comes to watch who is next, what is new. Paris is now more than ever the capital of fashion; it consolidates a lot of houses in one place, and is becoming more and more powerful.

Carlyne Cerf de Dudzeele, Anna Wintour and Suzy Menkes.

All right reserved, The Bill Cunningham Foundation LLC.

Carlyne Cerf de Dudzeele

Stylist

How on earth do you expect me to remember my first ever Paris fashion show?! Well… now I think of it, I believe it was Jean Paul Gaultier, in the Passage Vivienne. Everything was so different then; it was exciting and full of enthusiasm and energy. Everything was simple and fun!

Je t'embrasse XXXXXC😍

Maria Grazia Chiuri

Creative director, Dior

The first time I went to a Paris Fashion Week event was when I started working on accessories at Valentino. It was really the start of the collaboration. I arrived in November and was able to admire the Valentino haute-couture collection in January 2000. The show was held inside the Louvre, which helped me to understand how in France, unlike in Italy, fashion is considered an important part of the cultural heritage. I was honoured to be part of a brand that meant so much for fashion in Italy and on a global scale, and I was able to experience the unique and exciting atmosphere of that week. I remember the long walks I went on to see as much as I could of the exhibitions, the people, the stores; I felt like I was at the centre of the world.

Paris Fashion Week is an extraordinary opportunity to see fashion not only through the lens of its diverse creators and brands, but also through the medium of the fashion system as a whole. It is a sort of platform through which you can feel both the zeitgeist and how fashion appropriates every single movement over time, no matter how small. We cannot forget the set-up for the shows, their incredible choreography. The city is bursting with people from all over the world. There are unmissable exhibitions. All this is proof of how fashion is an important and powerful system, a business able to create work and innovation rooted in tradition. A system that creates culture and communication. It is aware of its responsibilities and the values it defends.

Coperni
CEO and creative director

Arnaud Vaillant

My first memory of Paris Fashion Week was an incredible show by McQueen, Spring/Summer 2009. I was mesmerized by the whole situation: the models, the backstage, the audience, the location, but I thought the collection was weird as I did not know anything about fashion! And McQueen came out as a bunny at the end, which was really fun.

Paris Fashion Week represents everything for us. It's one of the only times of the year where we can benefit from so many people being in town. Journalists, models, celebrities, buyers. It's incredible for a small brand like Coperni to gather all these people at the same time. We're having more and more fun doing our shows; they have more and more impact both physically and digitally. It's the best opportunity for us to show our work and to tell our story to such an amazing audience.

Sébastien Meyer

My first memory of Paris Fashion Week was a Pre-Fall Marc Jacobs show for Louis Vuitton in 2012. At that time I was a *cravate rouge*, a host; all the students at that time were working for an events agency called Florence Doré where you welcomed the guests and showed them to their seats. It was the best opportunity to see the shows. And what a show! I will remember the train that arrived in the middle of the space all my life. It was spectacular.

Paris Fashion Week is a unique moment in the year where people cross paths – creative people, models – there is a special energy. It's not only about fashion but also about music where we can discover and meet incredible DJs and artists during the after-shows. I will always remember our second after-show just after Covid with Clara 3000 and Nina Kraviz playing together – it was insane.

Ellie Grace Cumming
Stylist

Before I first attended Paris Fashion Week shows as a guest, I worked on them for five years, assisting stylists Katy England, Alister Mackie, and Venetia Scott. A multitude of moments backstage, working intensely and intimately in preparation, now inform my experiences of attending shows, giving me a heightened sensitivity to every detail and decision made by designers when planning collections and their presentation. From receiving and opening the invitation to the form chosen for that specific collection and how this has been realized, the location, the venue on arrival, the floor, the ceilings, the journey from the entrance to inside, the choice of seating, the scents, the sounds, the audience, finding your space, the runway fabrication, the lighting design, the atmosphere – breathing this all in as you enter each curated space, ready to be transported on a journey. The shows I treasure attending most are Comme des Garçons, the holy grail. It is a suspended dream sequence. The flood of emotions and thoughts conjured up, questions, reliving, breathing it all in again and again as you flood out of that same space with a completely new internal landscape.

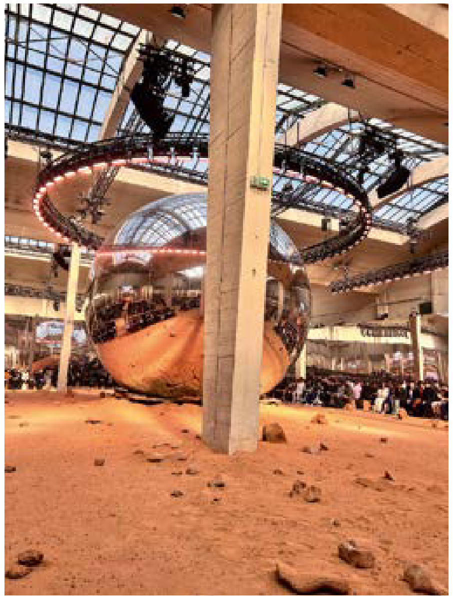
I started working full-time in fashion in 2008. The 15 years that have passed since have seen the industry grow exponentially, evolving within the digital age and moving into a realm of mass-media consumption. What was becoming normal for most houses pre-pandemic is now almost mandatory: their shows are streamed live internationally via multiple websites and social channels to reach global audiences. The cycle of interest in luxury goods reflects these expanded audiences, leading to the scale of shows growing beyond recognition. Around 10 years ago, there was an influx of street-style documentation through the burgeoning Instagram platform, which, in unison with the more established Style.com's coverage, led to guest lists expanding beyond press and buyers to friends of the house, the celebrity front row, and the age of influencers. It is now not unusual outside a venue to have to navigate your way first through photographers documenting the looks, then queues of screaming fans there for a glimpse of attending celebrity guests. This global audience has become an integral part of 'the show' – but with this there is still room for poetry and expression in fashion non-contingent on high budgets and production. It has never been more important to hold space for younger independent voices and the avant-garde; how else will we move forward creatively? I feel lucky to have experienced shows before this current media frenzy and personally I will always feel more comfortable backstage working with the team, creating.

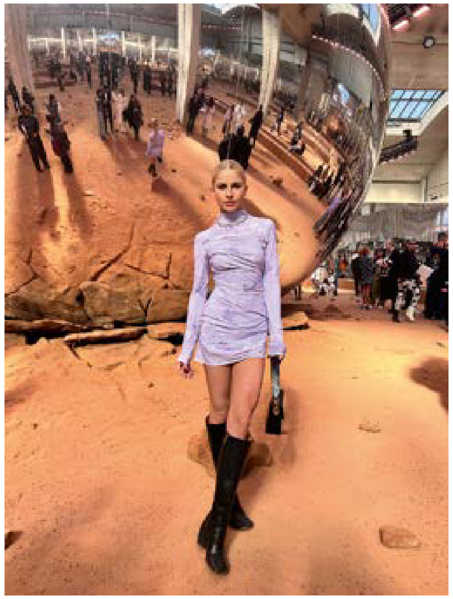
'Taken backstage right after Duran Lantink's debut show in Paris, in March 2023.
It shows the joy fashion can bring to people. Duran is one of many young creatives in Paris that make it exciting to walk and watch fashion (shows) now.'
Leon Dame, Marte Mei van Haaster, Jonas Glöer, Rianne Van Rompaey and Duran Lantink.

Leon Dame
Model

My first show was for the Japanese label Sacai. It must have been during menswear fashion week in summer 2015. I was 16 and came from a school trip straight to Paris. I remember being alone in Paris – it was my first time alone outside of Germany – walking the streets at night after my fitting the day before the show. Backstage, I remember the red carpets downstairs at the Bourse de Commerce where the show took place. Models laying around, going for smoking breaks, and the tons of hairspray right before the show making the bright lights look dusty.

Paris Fashion Week represents many diverse perspectives on fashion and beauty in general. There are many different takes on what luxury (fashion) means and should look like today and in the future. I enjoy seeing and feeling the energy of many (young) creatives in Paris starting their own projects or taking over projects and thereby transforming the industry. Paris feels very exciting right now; it seems to be pushing forward.

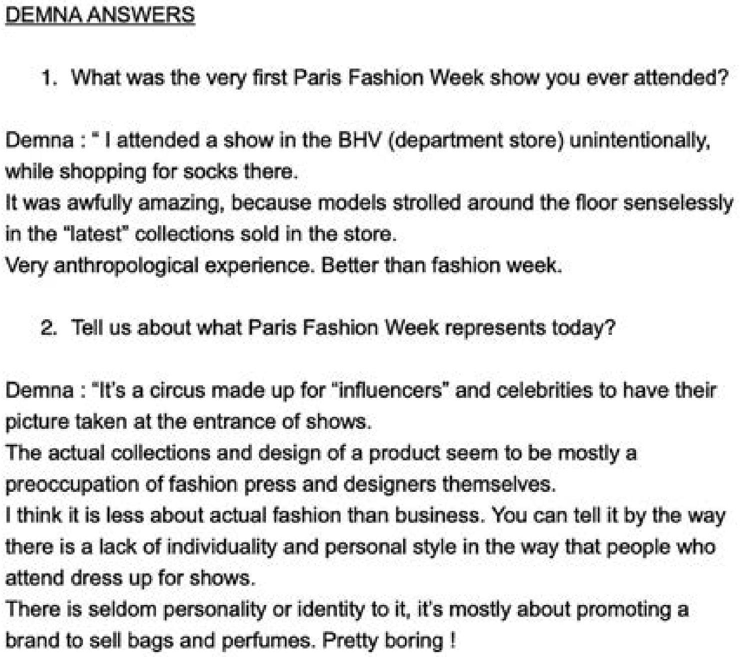




Caro Daur
Fashion blogger and model

One of the first shows I attended was Dior in 2016. I still remember like it was yesterday that first encounter with the unique atmosphere at a venue before a show starts. Walking the Dolce & Gabbana show in January 2017, being on the runway and backstage, and seeing it from a different perspective, was a one-of-a-kind experience and a privilege.

Paris Fashion Week represents two things for me. Firstly, there is the great place in fashion history that Paris holds as the birthplace of haute couture and the base of so many iconic fashion houses. Secondly, it is important on a personal level as it reminds me of how everything started and where I come from, seeing my first shows live and being in the city for my first jobs. It is special to see how Paris Fashion Week allows renowned fashion designers to showcase their creations and shape the industry. Plus, there is so much more to it than just fashion! It creates a platform for artists to voice political and ethical statements and viewpoints, which are then carried around the globe due to the international exposure and media attention. Combining Paris's rich cultural heritage with contemporary energy creates a distinctive atmosphere in which the industry can come together!



DEMNA ANSWERS

1. What was the very first Paris Fashion Week show you ever attended?

Demna : " I attended a show in the BHV (department store) unintentionally, while shopping for socks there.
It was awfully amazing, because models strolled around the floor senselessly in the "latest" collections sold in the store.
Very anthropological experience. Better than fashion week.

2. Tell us about what Paris Fashion Week represents today?

Demna : "It's a circus made up for "influencers" and celebrities to have their picture taken at the entrance of shows.
The actual collections and design of a product seem to be mostly a preoccupation of fashion press and designers themselves.
I think it is less about actual fashion than business. You can tell it by the way there is a lack of individuality and personal style in the way that people who attend dress up for shows.
There is seldom personality or identity to it, it's mostly about promoting a brand to sell bags and perfumes. Pretty boring !

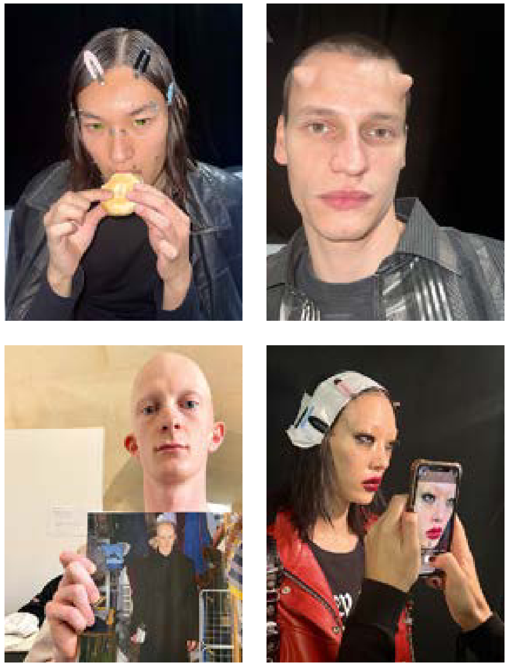
Demna
Artistic director, Balenciaga

Courrèges Autumn/Winter 2021-2022.

Nicolas Di Felice
Artistic director, Courrèges

I think it was the presentation of the Autumn/Winter 2004 collections. Through a friend, I had somehow managed to get an invitation to an Ann Demeulemeester show at the Couvent des Cordeliers. I took the train straight from Brussels just for those 15 minutes of magic. I remember distinctly Anne-Catherine Lacroix, walking in a deconstructed white coat. It was the first time I had ever seen her in real life. I still remember the amazing hairstyles – total Ann! It was the first time I had seen a designer express her entire universe. I saw it all coming together through the clothes, the casting, the music, the venue, and I believe that that is when I really understood the power and the poetry that fashion can create.

Paris Fashion Week was and still is a moment where people from all around the world get together to witness and experiment with fashion. In my opinion, a fashion show remains the best way to show our work by presenting it as an entire universe. Of course, Covid happened and has accelerated further the importance of visual content visible to everybody across all the platforms, social and more traditional media. This global online visibility is, of course, a huge opportunity for brands and creatives to show their work and for new talents to be discovered – which is the best thing about it in my opinion. But it can be tricky sometimes, as all the hype- and buzz-seeking can divert attention away from the collection and our craft – the actual things we were here for originally. Sometimes I feel this never-ending quest for more is making things sterile in a way.



Eliza Douglas
Artist and Balenciaga model

The first show I went to was the first show I walked in for Demna: Vetements, Autumn/Winter 2016. I had recently met him for the first time and he was casting his first Balenciaga show, and a lot of the models he chose to use in both shows. The Vetements show took place in a church and a few days later, he debuted his (and my) first Balenciaga collection. He had me close the Vetements show and then open Balenciaga, a symbolic gesture that in retrospect feels very Demna. I had not been paying attention to fashion prior to this, so it was a bit of a blur for me. I had no idea what I was getting into, and it was overflowing with visual stimulation. We were in a church, the models were so surreal, the clothes were just wild. It was a bit like a bunch of psychedelic artworks wearing gigantic boots were walking around. There were phrases written on the clothes – 'You fuck'n asshole', 'Big daddy', 'Sexual fantasies', 'Justin4ever', 'Drink from me and live forever' – and it felt like the collection had a poem written across it. The soundtrack was this child's voice shouting. Shirts had only one sleeve. Heels were made of lighters. An outfit that started in lace ended in tube socks. Chains were hanging off of frilly dresses. Scarves and belts dragged on the ground. Things were way too big; things were way too small. I had no idea it was going to turn into a long-term relationship for me, nor did I know what an impact it would have on my life. I had no idea what I was getting myself into – but it was beautiful.

I don't follow fashion in general or give much thought to it on a larger cultural level. I can only really reflect on it in the most personal way. For me, Paris Fashion Week represents a fun break from my other life. Since I don't work in fashion in general, and I just do projects for Demna, it's this fun, luxurious and inspiring time. At this point I have been working with Balenciaga for eight years, so there are some people I have gotten to know quite well, and I really love them. The shows and the clothes are so brilliant; it's such a privilege to be inside the process. I feel so lucky that I get to be a part of it.

Dovile Drizyte
Creative partner of Juergen Teller

The first show I attended was Rick Owens in 2011. My friend, the author Ian Luna, invited me to see what really good fashion looked like. It was spectacular then, and still is now. It had a feeling of style and a sense of the extraordinary.

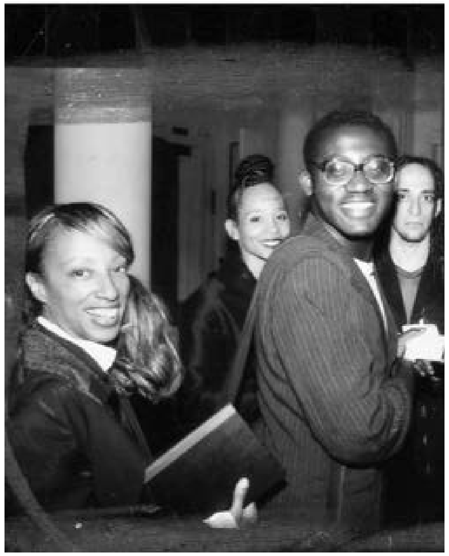
Paris Fashion Week is always exciting and fun. It's become more inclusive, in certain cases, which is great. However, I think there's too much focus on marketing and social media, in the hope of financial gain or becoming famous. Everyone takes the same pictures and posts them on social media, and everyone puts a like on them. In this process, people might be missing what's in front of their eyes. I'd say leave your smartphones at home and enjoy the show.

Pigalle, Autumn/Winter 2013 show, Paris.

Tremaine Emory
Creative director, Supreme, and founder, Denim Tears

My first fashion show in Paris was walking at the Fall/Winter 2013 Pigalle fashion show. I met Stéphane Ashpool around 2010 at Charaf Tajer's club Le Pompon. We all became friends over the next few years. Stéphane cast me in his fashion show after I played in a basketball tournament he put on. I extended my trip and walked the show. As the picture shows, Virgil was there, too, and this was the first time we met properly back in 2012. I remember at the afterparty at Le Pompon, Virgil came up to me and introduced himself. He said, 'You're from Brooklyn, right?' and I said, 'Nah B, I'm from Queens', and he said, 'Yeahhhhhhhhh.' We both laughed and he bought me a drink… The rest is history.

Paris Fashion Week represents the best of times and the worst of times. It has all gone too far but at the same time not far enough. Read into that as you like, but, I mean, it's just fashion anyway. ;)



Edward Enninful in Paris, early nineties.

Edward Enninful, OBE
Editor in chief, British *Vogue*, and European editorial director, *Vogue*

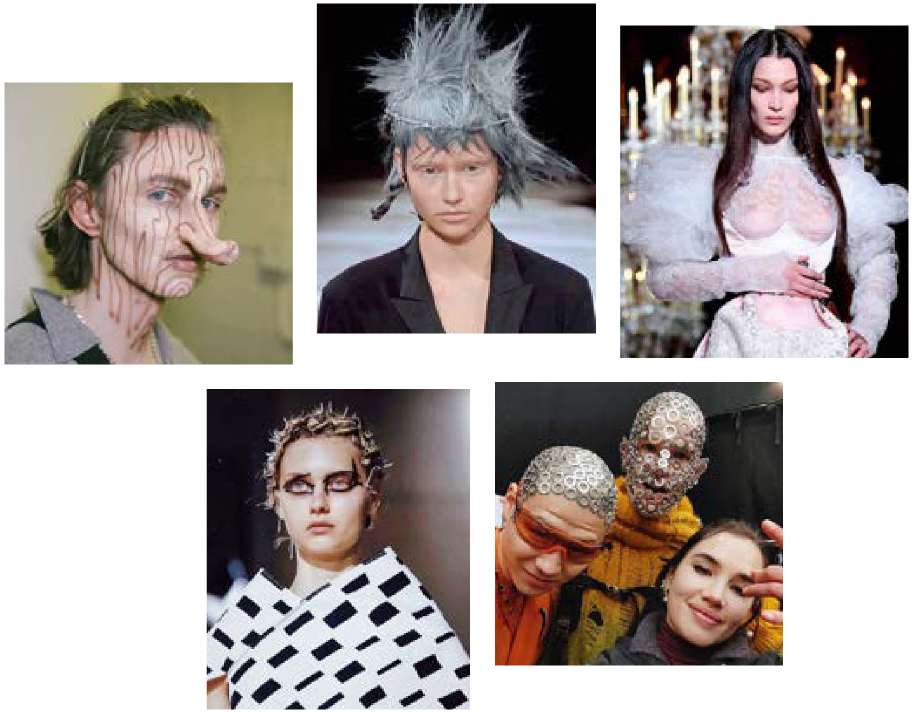
My first show in Paris was John Galliano in 1993. I was in the back row and so happy to be there. I didn't even know you got to sit down at a show, I was that new to the world of fashion. But I loved the energy from the moment I walked in. Galliano is so talented and he made Kate Moss – my friend from London, walking her first show for him – look out of this world. I remember being mesmerized by the girls; they were the most beautiful things I had ever seen. Helena, Kate, Naomi, Christy. A year later all these women would become some of my best friends, but as I stood watching them take to the catwalk they simply took my breath away. I'd been working at *i-D* in London for a short while, but something about Paris went to the next level of inspiration for me.

Paris is still the height of fashion and creativity. It is the epicentre of the leading houses in our business and has placed itself at the apex of excellence. Paris has never lost its talent or edge. If London is the hotbed for young talent, Paris is where luxury comes out to play.

‘Stealing flowers from a show.’

Sophie Fontanel
Journalist

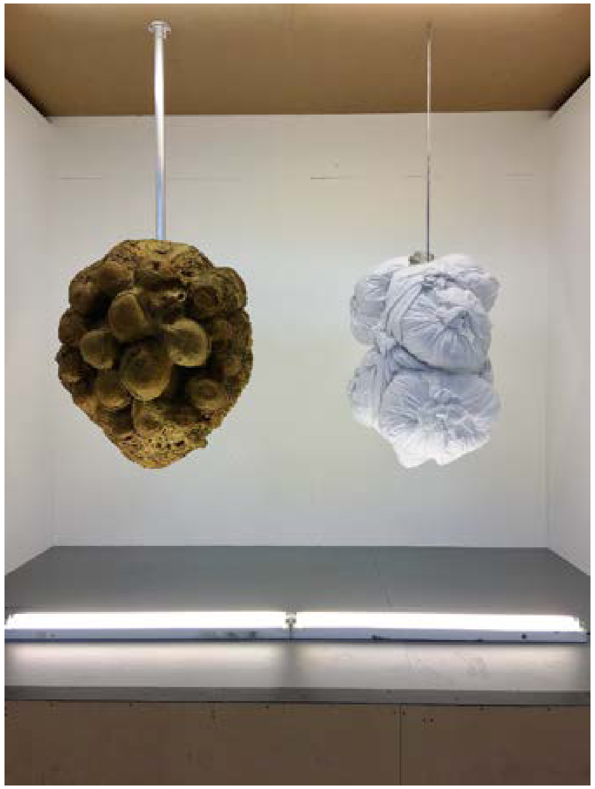
It was a Martine Sitbon show at the École des Beaux-Arts, sometime in the late 1980s. I was a young journalist and allowed to go backstage before the show. It was a revelation: the beauty of everything; the youth; the precision; the poetry. I had just found my place on earth. And I remember the same week, the same year, the ambience at Sonia Rykiel. Champagne before the show. Everybody smiling, even on the catwalk. Paris is still there. That’s because Paris embraces every segment, from luxury to upcoming trends. The balance is so great. All the fashion students are in there. Stronger than all this, the most important thing: fashion during Paris Fashion Week invades all the café terraces; it goes directly deep into the veins of the street. Not everything, but the mood, yes.



Clockwise from top left: Vivienne Westwood Autumn/Winter 2019. Yohji Yamamoto Spring/Summer 2022.
Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood Autumn/Winter 2020.
Junya Watanabe Spring/Summer 2018. Off-White Autumn/Winter 2023.

Isamaya Ffrench
Make-up artist

The first Paris Fashion Week show I attended was Junya Watanabe Spring/Summer 2015. I was working backstage, keying the make-up for the show. It’s still one of my most memorable shows, because it was my first time working with him. What I remember most vividly is how Junya approached make-up creation. We would work for months leading up to the show on concepts and ideas based on a vague brief. I would create PDFs of ideas and then get lots of feedback from him, but I didn’t actually see the clothes until the day before the show. I think he wanted to keep a separation between the make-up team and his work, so we weren’t too heavily informed by what he was feeling. It created a unique collaboration because ultimately he was driving us, in his own way, to his vision. Paris Fashion Week is still the most exciting experience of all the fashion weeks around the world. There’s something very intense and culturally rich about the city. It feels very serious and I often get to do my most interesting work with the designers who show in Paris, such as Vivienne Westwood, Junya Watanabe and Thom Browne, so it’s at the top of the list for me. I think the industry takes Paris more seriously in general; you have all the big groups who create those large-scale, expensive events and shows that drive international crowds to the city, which is a great opportunity for smaller, independent brands (like Ottolinger, for which I also work) to try to get as many industry people to come and see their work as well.



Louise Bourgeois and Rei Kawakubo,
Barneys New York window installation, 2017.

Dennis Freedman
Creative director

I first attended Paris Fashion Week in 1998, the year that we launched *W* Magazine. For the next 18 years I travelled to Paris every spring and fall. It's impossible to put into words how the experience changed my life. My mind is flooded by the memories, by flashes of brilliance: McQueen, Margiela, Lang, Alaïa, Owens, Ghesquière, Yamamoto, Galliano. However, one collection stands alone, apart from all the others: Comme des Garçons, Fall 2015. *Ceremony of Separation*. The Cycle. Life. Loss, Memory. Death. A runway so narrow that two women are forced to stop, turn, face each other, lock eyes, separate. Kawakubo distilled it all with such clarity. With the simplest of gestures. Flash-forward to Spring 2017 and the Comme des Garçons retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Art of the In-Between*. Miraculously the dates coincided with my final windows at Barneys New York. Through the generosity of Jerry Gorovoy, the life-long assistant of Louise Bourgeois, I was able to access a selection of her iconic sculptures. In my mind's eye, I always saw a connection between the work of these two iconic women. In life, they never met. It was my dream to place their work side by side. To lock eyes. To turn. To face each other. In the windows. Open to the street. For everyone to see.

Michel Gaubert
Composer and DJ

Thierry Mugler's Spring/Summer 1984 was the first show that made me realize that a fashion show was more than seeing clothes on a runway. Mugler had based the show on the Olympic Games that were to take place in Los Angeles later that year, and staged an Olympic extravaganza that I still remember today. The music was *Koyaanisqatsi* by Philip Glass and the models were mostly wearing sport-inspired uniforms, while giant flags floated in the background. It was groundbreaking and forward-looking. When I walked out of the show, I decided I wanted to do music for fashion – simple as that.

Paris is the major player of fashion weeks. It has always welcomed designers and people from very different backgrounds, making it international and inclusive. What makes Paris exciting is how opposites attract and in one day you can see emerging designers, luxury players, and independent brands spanning a wide range of ideas.

STYLE NOT COM

‘Selfie with Eiffel Tower when it was blue.’

Beka Gvishiani
Founder, Stylenotcom

I attended my first Paris Fashion Week show in 2015, as the plus-one of my friend, with a fake name. I pretended to be her husband. It took me seven years to finally get invited under my own name, as the founder of Stylenotcom. It was 19 January 2022, 14.00, the AMI Paris show at Palais Brongniart. One of my best memories from that show was meeting with Loïc Prigent, who told me: ‘You invented a new water.’ Are you thirsty?

Since Paris is the kingdom of fashion, Paris Fashion Week is a royal ball, but with jeans.

Eva Gödel
Founder and owner of model agency, Tomorrow Is Another Day

Raf Simons’ *May the Circle be Unbroken* – Spring/Summer 2004 – was my first fashion show. Raf had asked me a week before if I could bring five boys from my final thesis project *Nine Daughters and a Stereo* to Paris to walk his show. We rented a van and I asked a friend from school if we could stay in her flat. I drove them to Paris and the show and everything around it was magic. The backstage preparations, all the people from all over the world preparing all day, and then the show in the Parc Floral, and all the visitors. The show experience was intense, the models walking barefoot and partly topless through the green. The atmosphere Raf had created was indescribable; I was so proud the boys could do it. They looked stark and at the same time contemplative and at ease with themselves. After the show I drove them all home to Cologne. They were overwhelmed by their feelings and partied in the back of the bus. I knew I wanted to keep doing this for the rest of my life.

Paris Fashion Week is the most important event of the year for me, my team and our models. The careers of our new models mostly start there. Designers are most open to booking new faces and our models get the most castings. I feel honoured and proud that we can bring so many different characters we discovered on the street to Paris and contribute to shaping the look of fashion today. It is the best feeling when I see one of our models walking a first runway show. Each time it is a lot of work and excitement and expectation for us and the models. I always tell them if you don’t get confirmed in the end just see it as a great opportunity, and if you have time in between the castings and jobs, go look around and maybe visit the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre. We take such a diverse team of models to Paris Fashion Week; they come from all over the world and totally different backgrounds. We try to make sure that every one gets the most out of it in terms of jobs, but also in terms of experience and having a good time. At the end of fashion week we go to Chez Omar with all our models to celebrate the final day. I always do a group photo, for 20 years now.

Katie Grand and Jessica Stam at the Louis Vuitton Autumn/Winter 2011 womenswear show.

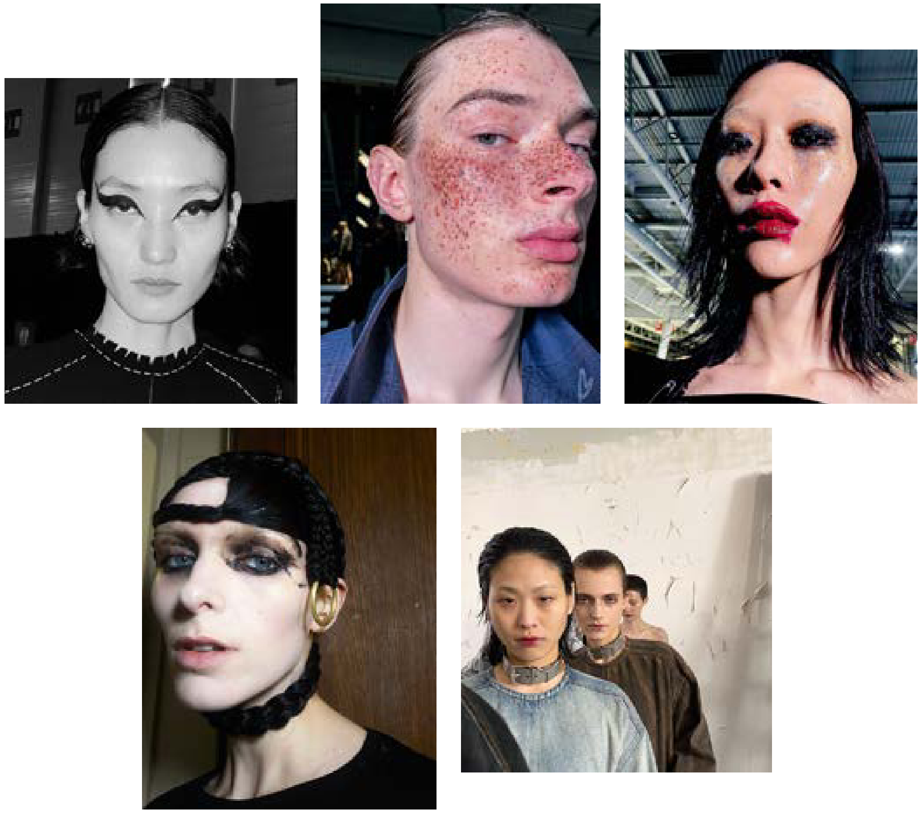
Katie Grand
Stylist and founder, *Perfect* magazine

I think my first show was Galliano in 1990 – it may have been Comme, but I'm pretty sure it was Galliano. I was at Saint Martins on the first-year trip to the Paris shows. Comme had actually sent us tickets to attend the show, but for everyone else you just haggled and snuck in. My trick was to wet my hair and run up to security saying I was a model coming from another show. We were also given video cameras by BBC2 as we were filming backstage for a show called *The Look*, so at Miyake we said we were reporters from the BBC and they gave us complete access. At Galliano I stood next to Michael Hutchence who was there to see Helena Christensen; I think it was Kate Moss's first show, and we had friends backstage who were sewing and helping the team. It was all so exciting. Today it's so different – I'm invited to shows for a start!

Amelia Gray
Model

My first ever Paris Fashion Week experience was walking for Vivienne Westwood in September 2022. To me, this was my absolute dream that had seemed so far away. I will never forget that day or the moment when I was told I was doing it. For me, Vivienne Westwood (along with her husband, Andreas, of course) is the perfect representation of how Paris fashion is shifting. She was adventurous, punk, thought outside of every single box, and most importantly, she was a female designer. I felt so empowered, elegant, and confident in her clothes, and I think that perfectly represents Parisian fashion.

Paris Fashion Week is changing and challenging the norms of elegance and chicness, which I really love so much. I think that houses like Schiaparelli, Balenciaga, Courrèges, Westwood, and others are changing the narrative of what 'Parisian fashion' means. Of course, the chic bones of Parisian fashion will never change, but they are evolving – and I love that.

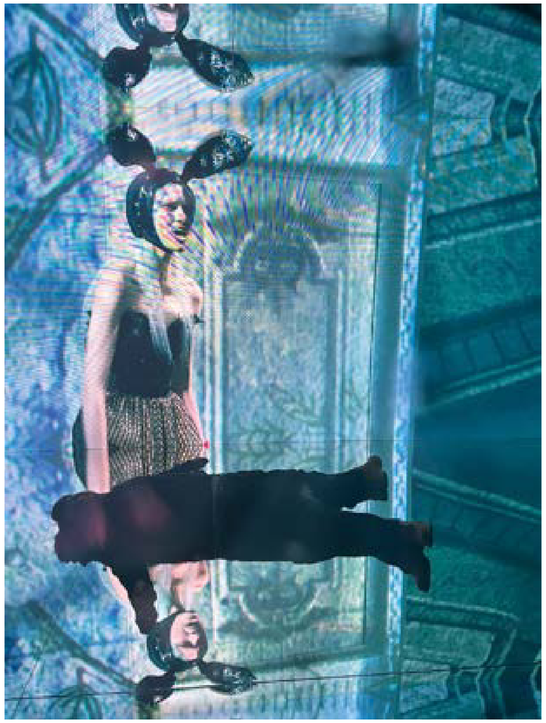


Top row: Balenciaga, October 2022.
Bottom row: Junya Watanabe, March 2023. Y/Project, March 2023.

Inge Grognard
Make-up artist

My memory for dates is not great, but I think the first show that I attended was Jean Paul Gaultier, the one with copied invitations, around 1985. I was overwhelmed by the spectacle and the audience. The first show that I worked on in Paris was the Martin Margiela show in 1989.

Paris is still the place for me that breathes fashion, all the way. It's the city, the houses, the traditions, and the people. It's luxury but also creativity. It is still the dream of a lot of designers to finally do a show in Paris.



'Lying on the floor at Maison Margiela's artisanal video installation in the house's new offices on Place des États-Unis, Paris.'

Tom Guinness
Stylist

My first experience of a Paris Fashion Week show was walking in the Autumn/Winter 2006 Lanvin show at Hôtel de Crillon. My main memory is of a then quite young Alber Elbaz giving us all a passionate motivational speech about who our characters were supposed to be, and a lot of Freudian detail about our relationships with our mothers. Very enlightening stuff that made me realize that not everyone in the fashion world is stupid.

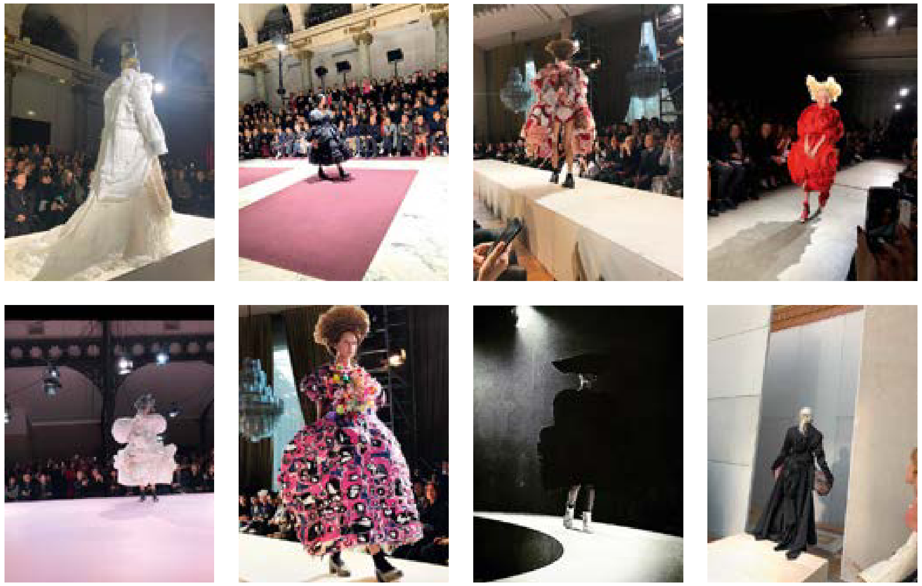
In this brave new world, Paris Fashion Week represents a human and charming sense of unity and togetherness, but in reality there are so many worlds within worlds and economies within economies that there is no common experience of it. It's as diverse as the world we live in.

Hermès Spring/Summer 2017 show set, October 2016.
Pierre Hardy's shoe collection for the Sacai Spring/Summer 2018 show, Paris, October 2017.

Pierre Hardy
Designer

The very first show? I think it was Yohji Yamamoto. Or Jean Paul Gaultier? That was the time when designers, each and all of them – Rei Kawakubo, Thierry Mugler, Helmut Lang, Martin Margiela – were projecting an absolute personal vision of the next way to dress and defining what was a garment. Not only this – they were also sketching a different anatomy and way to move, the types of human beings we could be, the relationships clothes could create in a certain type of society. Designers were speaking with their own voices season after season, shaping ideal new types of human and inventing visions of beauty, each one singular. The fashion show was the revelation and sharing of this vision, in a private or intimate moment. It was about discovering a pure aesthetic emotion. We could laugh or cry. The moment was about experimenting with something unknown, unseen, unfelt.

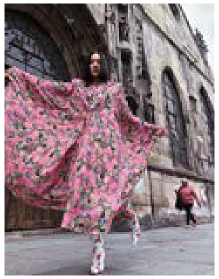
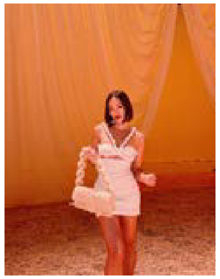
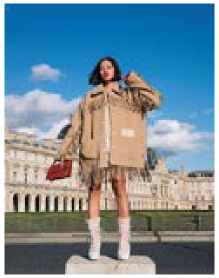
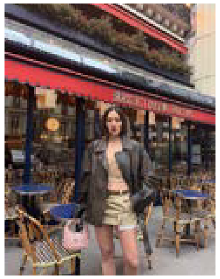
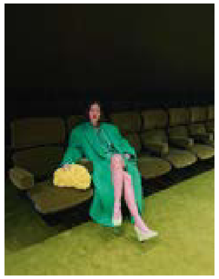
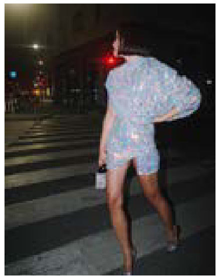
Paris Fashion Week was this particular moment when all these different 'tribes' showed up. Today, the shows are more and more sophisticated and giant, and part of a global communication system and market. The power is tangible. Creating 'new shapes' to define a strong identity is no longer a priority. Fashion 'houses' or brands are now among the biggest businesses in the world, and the priority has shifted from creating products for a singular aesthetic vision or lifestyle to servicing a global image, lifestyle, and profit. Very few designers still express their own vision under their own name. Houses have globalized the design and production of clothes, accessories, perfumes. The original elements of their identity have been replaced by repetitive logos, gimmick logo-patterns, or simple colour codes, that aim to make us think that the brands' latest branding gimmicks have always been their exclusive 'DNA'. Brands are now working on their growth, not on developing an original and exclusive aesthetic vocabulary. Fashion is just one of the tools they can use to feed a global system, dressing up everyday basics. Nonetheless, Paris Fashion Week still succeeds in mixing these mega-events with strong, creative shows from designers expressing a personal vision of what fashion could (or should?) be. That is a strength.

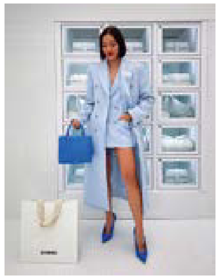


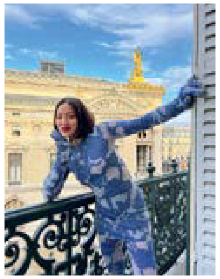
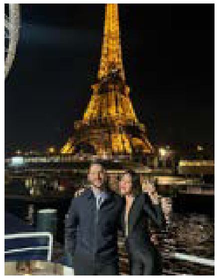
Amanda Harlech
Stylist and creative consultant

The first Paris fashion show I saw was in 1984: Karl Lagerfeld's Chloé collection. I can still feel my eyes widen as I witnessed the power of a show where not only the clothes but the girls, the set, the music unravelled a story that swept you into its unique, sensuous world. For 20 minutes reality shifted and at the finale, with Karl waving and flowers thrown onto the catwalk, I felt something had shifted in *me*. A perception of who I might be had changed. I remember the glorious abandon of the 18th-century transposed into a present. That initiation has never left me.

Today Paris Fashion Week is much more exacting. Some shows are extreme installations; some are more introspective. But the focus is as much on the front row as it is on the collection. Great shows by great designers still perform the miracle of displacement and revelation, but it is very different; there is a different tension. The iPhone worship at the finale always makes me question seeing over our desire for content.

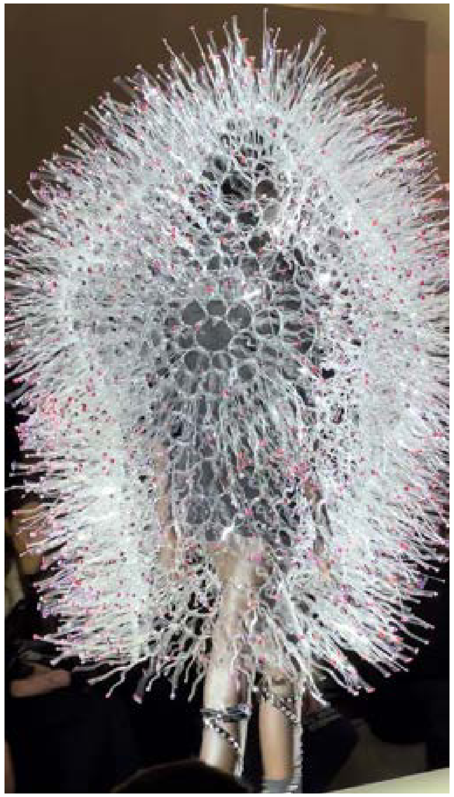


Tiffany Hsu
Fashion buying director, Mytheresa

One of my earliest Paris Fashion Week memories takes me back to the captivating Alexander McQueen show when Lee was still at the helm [Autumn/Winter 2006]. An extraordinary spectacle with a hologram of Kate Moss in a circus-themed setting, it left me in complete awe. The sheer artistry and innovation were mind-blowing. Another unforgettable moment was my first Galliano show, where the runway was transformed into a barn, and he swung into the finale. As an ardent admirer of his work, it was a moment that etched itself into my memory. I cherished the invitation on it like a keepsake of a magical experience.

Paris Fashion Week consistently delivers the most exceptional and memorable shows, taking the artistry of fashion to new heights. Paris itself serves as a nostalgic backdrop, embodying the historical legacy of European fashion capitals. The city's innate charm and allure infuse each runway presentation with a touch of enchantment. Paris Fashion Week symbolizes the epitome of luxury fashion, showcasing the scale and grandeur of an industry that continually pushes boundaries and redefines artistic expression.



Audrey Hu
Fashion director, *Numéro* China and *Modern Weekly Style*

I am a fashion-week newbie – my very first Paris Fashion Week was Autumn 2022 couture. At the Théâtre National de Chaillot, John Galliano for Maison Margiela staged an ambitious performance that mixed theatre and rudimentary special effects, with models lip-synching to a pre-recorded soundtrack as a livestreamed movie unfolded in real time. The theatrics and the nostalgic showmanship to me personally still matter in the contemporary scene.

Paris Fashion Week represents possibility and the opportunity to witness the collision of fashion's rich history with contemporary ideas.

Denise Hu
Casting director

The first show I attended was Viktor&Rolf Autumn/Winter 2015 couture in the Palais de Tokyo. The collection was called *Wearable Art*: the garments were taken off the models and became artworks hanging on the wall. I was so excited to see the performance!

Paris Fashion Week still represents a romantic, exquisite and luxurious world; it's the mainstay of luxury fashion all over the world. It's great there is more diversity among the models on the runway nowadays. Ten years ago you probably never saw many Asian models during the whole fashion week; now you can sometimes see 15 in a single show.

Carlijn Jacobs
Photographer

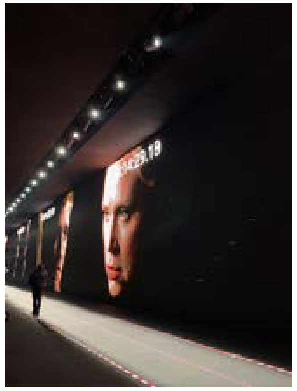
I think it was in 2016 when I went to Y/Project by Glenn Martens, in an old school building in the Marais. I helped with photos backstage and it was chaotic but a lot of fun! I didn't live in Paris at that time, so it was a great experience.

Paris Fashion Week represents vanity, capitalism, inspiration, art, diversity – basically, everything at once. It's a bit like a zoo, which is fascinating and crazy at the same time. I love to stare at those peacocks!

Simon Porte Jacquemus during Paris Fashion Week, circa 2012.

Simon Porte Jacquemus
Designer and founder, Jacquemus

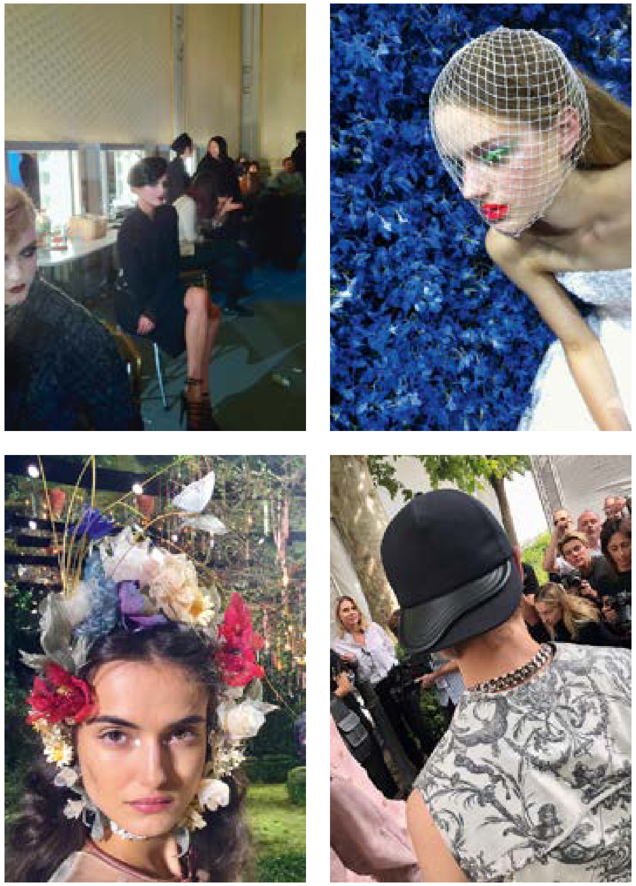
My first memory of Paris Fashion Week was when I tried everything to get into Jeremy Scott's fashion show back in 2012 or 2013. I felt like the fashion world was inaccessible and that you could never enter a fashion party. Surprisingly, the people inside were so nice and friendly. The event was a runway show that ended up as a party; I wished that it would last forever. I was wearing pyjamas with a cat print all over them, with giant eighties sunglasses – I thought I was so cool at the time!



Kim Jones
Artistic director, Dior Men's, and Fendi womenswear and couture

It would be a McQueen show early 2000s. It was really fun as it was all the London gang in Paris. We ended up playing pool at a large house on Avenue de New-York – Lee, Kate and myself.

Paris just seems to be the epicentre of fashion weeks – everyone turns up and the couture aspect really raises the bar. You have to challenge yourself every season as you know everyone is there to expect the best.



Images taken by Stephen Jones while working with different designers at Christian Dior.
Clockwise from top left: John Galliano, Raf Simons, Kim Jones, Maria Grazia Chiuri.

Stephen Jones

Milliner

The first show I attended in Paris was in 1984 for the Spring/Summer collection of Jean Paul Gaultier, which I actually worked on. He had seen me in the Culture Club video, ‘Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?’ and wanted me to model in his show. Unfortunately, I had broken my leg, so I couldn’t do that. Later, I made hats for his women’s show and this was really my entrée into Paris.

Since Rose Bertin, who was the first couturier milliner and celebrity in the fashion world in the court of Louis XIV, Paris has been the centre of fashion. It still is – and it’s getting stronger every season.

Ib Kamara with Naomi Campbell at the Off-White
Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 women and men’s ready-to-wear show.

Ib Kamara

Editor in chief, *Dazed*, and art and image director, Off-White

The very first Paris Fashion Week show I vividly remember was a Spring/Summer Givenchy show by Riccardo Tisci. I was still in school at Central Saint Martins and a group of us got cheap Eurostar tickets, stayed in a tiny Airbnb, and tried our luck getting into all the shows. I don’t know how, but we managed to sneak into the Givenchy show – and it was amazing. The energy in the room was electric, and along with the setting, was truly inspiring. It will always stay with me.

A fashion show during Paris Fashion Week is something really special. People from all the different parts of a creative industry coming together to celebrate, support, critique and be part of a collective is something I’m not sure happens in other industries. Paris really celebrates and develops craftsmanship, and really comes alive during the week; it is filled with creativity. When I think of Paris, and specifically fashion in Paris, I feel hopeful for the next generation. It is a place of ideas and excitement, where dreams are born.

CHANEL SHOPPING CENTER
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CHANEL SHOPPING CENTER

Irene Kim
Model and journalist

One of the very first Paris Fashion Week shows I ever attended was the iconic Chanel 'supermarket' show for Autumn/Winter 2014. Chanel was the first luxury brand to ever invite me and sit me front row. My most vivid recollection of it is… basically everything! Only Karl Lagerfeld could hold a fashion show in a supermarket-themed set and turn everything into Chanel. From the entrance of the Grand Palais to the Chanel grocery store check-out counters, from the Chanel-logo tomato soups to the Chanel shopping carts. Instagram wasn't really a thing and I didn't know anyone in the industry at the time, so I was purely there cherishing every moment of the visual explosion Karl had created.

Paris Fashion Week represents hope. It's a moment when I am lucky enough to experience the creations of the designer's collections first-hand. Having been able to experience it live for so many years is such an honour. Fashion has given me the chance to express myself and connect with many others who share similar values. The impact of social media has accelerated the growth of luxury fashion and given fashion the platform to be more accessible to our youth.

Andreas Kronthaler
Designer, Vivienne Westwood

The first Paris fashion show I worked with Vivienne on was called *Salon* in 1991. It was shown at Azzedine Alaïa's; he gave her the opportunity to present the collection in his new atelier in the Marais. I was selected to dress Naomi. When I first saw her, she was sitting on the floor leaning against a wall on her mobile phone. No one had a mobile phone in those days, but she had one. She got up and stood in front of me, and after I'd looked into her face, I ran into the street and had to cry because I've never seen anybody so beautiful.

Paris has this immense history with fashion. It's where fashion was invented in the 19th century. It's the best place to present your work to the world. It lives fashion.

Lina Kutsovskaya
Founder and creative director, Be Good Studios

In March 1984, when I was about eight years old, I attended a Thierry Mugler show in Paris. My mother had been commissioned by a newspaper in Soviet Ukraine to write an article about the fashion house's ten-year anniversary. It was my first time visiting a foreign country, let alone seeing a fashion show. It wasn't until years later that I realized that fashion shows were sadly far more exclusive and elitist than the Mugler one I'd been to – it had had an audience of thousands. These days, with the rise of social media, independent magazines, new designers, collaborations, capsule collections et cetera, fashion has become fractured – and hopefully for the better. It's actually refreshing to see people on the front row change so frequently, leaving the old guard sitting next to an influencer with a bigger impact and reach than a mainstream magazine. I am hoping that what I once experienced as a child at that Mugler show will happen again, creating a broader and more democratic interest in fashion shows.

Photograph by Marco Ovando.

Ladyfag
Writer and performer

Jean Paul Gaultier, couture 2007. It was my first time in Paris. I was flown in to host the Club Sandwich party at Neo nightclub. I had no money and my phone was about to be cut off if I didn't pay the $300 bill. This was 2007, so phones didn't even have cameras back then, let alone internet, so I figured why do I need it anyways? I need to be able to eat when I'm there, so I went to Paris with no phone, $300, and a lot of wide-eyed youthful excitement! The show was breathtaking; it had kings, queens, maharajas with these jaunty, tilted crowns on their heads, and then Coco Rocha came out dancing a jig near the end and people went crazy. I believe it was the first time she had done this now-iconic runway situation! I grew up worshipping Gaultier and could never afford to own some, let alone ever imagine I would get to see a show. The atelier is so beautiful with this grand staircase, and when I got to my seat, a card was attached with a ribbon to the back of my chair and in the most beautiful calligraphy it read, 'Madame Ladyfag'. It was like a fairy tale. I kept the name card as a souvenir to remember that feeling forever.

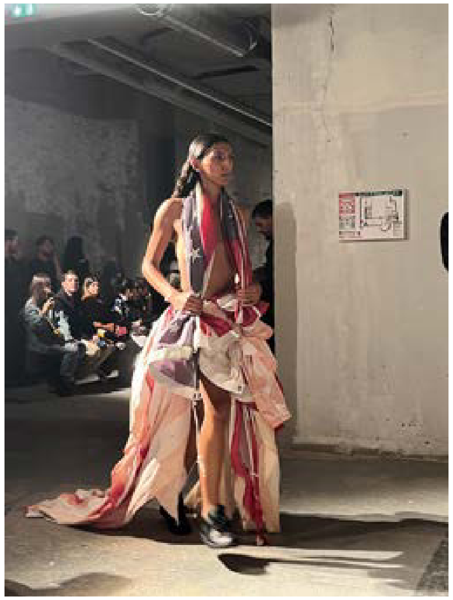
I throw events and am a firm believer in 'you need to be there'. In the age of online digital everything, there's still nothing that can replace the real experience. The grandiose spectacle of a show is what builds excitement and sets a mood for a brand. It also sets a tone of desire for the people who can't be there and are watching it all go down from their screens. For luxury to be scalable you need to have a glimpse of a world you can only wish to be in... or at least buy into!

Courtesy of OWENSCORP.

Michèle Lamy
Co-founder, OWENSCORP

My first memory of Paris fashion shows… 1973… Kenzo Takada, *Jungle Jap*… Place des Victoires… in his store… What I remember… such a party... balloons... fun... *bonheur.* I see it now as the continuation of the ludic part of May '68... Freedom, *liberté*… celebration of the first prêt-à-porter… Saint Laurent Rive Gauche, Sonya Rykiel and my favourite, Dorothée Bis… Thierry Mugler, Chez Gudule!!!!!!

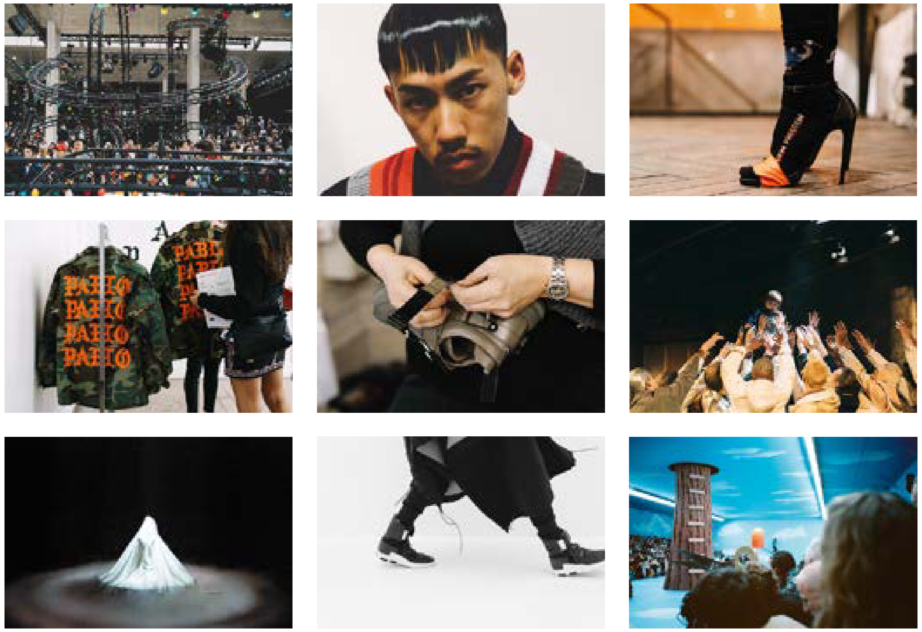
But Kenzo and Issey Miyake opened the way… and all the greatest Japanese followed: Rei and Comme des Garçons, Yohji Yamamoto. Those are the ones who made Paris the 'stage' of fashion week.



Yohana Lebasi
Stylist

The first Paris Fashion Week show I attended was Comme des Garçons Autumn/Winter 2019, which I stumbled my way into with my more senior American *Vogue* colleagues. I remember being gripped by how momentous the show felt – there was an overwhelming excitement of being in another world that felt so fantastically far from what was happening in my life and in the world.

Paris Fashion Week today seems to represent the changing expectations and demands of what luxury is. Less artisanal, eccentric, *haut* – more accessible, democratic, diluted even. It is a catch-22 and a sober reminder that above all, fashion is a business. At the same time, Paris and Paris Fashion Week have made a comeback of sorts as the creative centre of the fashion world in all of those ways. Everyone is here… myself included.



Top row: Dior 2016. Facetasm, backstage. Heron Preston, Autumn/Winter 2017.
Middle row: Kanye West, Life of Pablo pop-up, Paris. OAMC, Autumn/Winter 2017 backstage. Pigalle.
Bottom row: Undercover. Backstage at Y3. Louis Vuitton, menswear, Autumn/Winter 2020.

Arby Li
Vice president of content strategy, Hypebeast

My first Paris Fashion Week show was Facetasm Spring/Summer 2016. I actually took a vacation to do that trip to Paris and experience what fashion week was about, as well as to practice shooting images backstage because I had only been with Hypebeast for two years at that point. What I remember most vividly about that fashion week is how there was so much going on with all the shows, presentations, pop-ups, et cetera, and just trying to figure out where to go.

Paris Fashion Week is still the pinnacle, where designers and brands showcase their latest creations, but with the rise of digital you might actually see all of it faster on your phone than if you were there at the show. As information is so readily available nowadays, it's become about who can gain the most attention both digitally and physically.

Lucia Liu
Stylist

It was March 2011, Chanel Autumn/Winter 2011, before I had worked as a fashion editor at any magazine. The trip was styling a Chinese actress, Yao Chen, who had also been invited to the show by Chanel for the first time. It was an epic show and I remember the atmosphere of a dark forest with a foggy background and a super-fine Chanel jacket teamed with distressed denim leggings.

Even if during the pandemic we learned to do most things online, meeting and talking, and sharing creative ideas that celebrate 'beautiful creatures' are still some of the most joyful things in life.

Raul Lopez
Designer and founder, Luar

My first ever show in Paris was Jean Paul Gaultier in the *earlier* 2000s. It was all about the theatrics of the show. The beauty of it. Just everything coming together in that moment was really amazing to me – and that's why I still love shows in Paris to this day. Coming from New York, I've always felt that Paris is like a portal; I come here and there's a really large community that I've got to know. It's crazy but pretty iconic. I love my people! The future of Paris Fashion Week is… fashion!

Virgil was here

'Leon Dame on the catwalk for Maison Margiela Spring/Summer 2020.
Omari and his tattoo at Paris Fashion Week after Virgil died.'

Anders Christian Madsen
Fashion critic, British *Vogue*

My first show in Paris was John Galliano's Autumn/Winter 2011 men's collection. At least, it's the show I remember most vividly from my virgin voyage. He turned the Couvent des Cordeliers into a glistening snowscape and marched these larger-than-life, head-spinningly sexy apparitions of a defecting Rudolf Nureyev through the fan-vaulted cloisters. At the end, John took his triumphant bow, briefly stopping to tip the snow off his *papakha*, and I thought it was the most magical thing I'd ever seen.

My Paris Fashion Week life has very much been shaped by the dichotomy between the shows of John Galliano and Virgil Abloh. Virgil always told me how much he admired John's work, and I always found beautiful synergy in the fact that these two geniuses from completely different worlds did the hugely influential work they did – at Maison Margiela and Louis Vuitton, respectively – at the same time. Between them, they set the agenda for the new age of creativity, inclusivity and courage.

‘Two photos I took during our Spring/Summer 2023 show in September 2022.’

Isabel Marant
Designer

One of the first shows I attended was a Jean Paul Gaultier show in 1989. I remember this crazy atmosphere, the fantastic super-eclectic crowd, a mix of journalists and all the cool kids of the era wearing amazing looks with freedom. We were coming out of the eighties and it was so fresh to be part of this boho-punkish-hip-hop crowd. At this time, the ambience was about screaming the models’ names, a lot of them were not professionals, just great characters who would come with their crew. It really felt like a mix of a party and a show!

Paris Fashion Week remains one of the most creative and strongest fashion events in the world. It offers such a great diversity of creation, welcoming established, as well younger designers from all over the world. Paris has kept a unique sense of luxury, offering shows with amazing set-ups that you don’t see anywhere else!

Glenn Martens
Creative director, Diesel and Y/Project

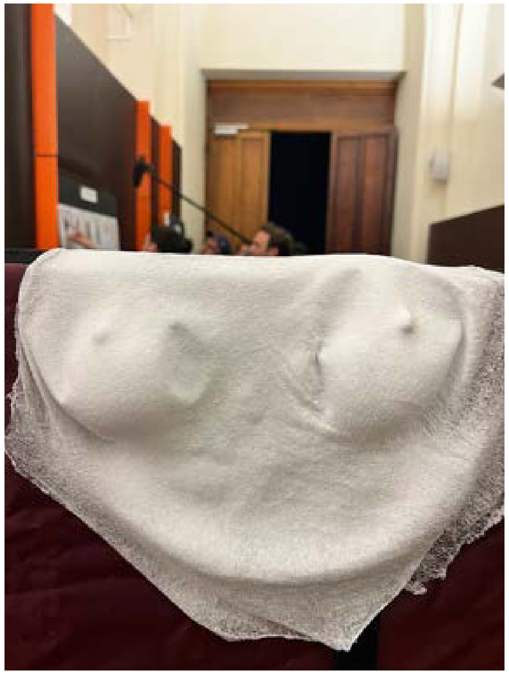
The first runway show that I ever saw, I was in the second year at Antwerp’s Academy, in 2005. Veronique Branquinho would always request that Academy students help prepare the runway, to dress the models. So we left in the morning in a bus, went to the venue, spent the whole day there, and were back by the evening. I was blessed because that day I had chosen to wear black, so I got upgraded, and got sent out front stage to help the PR team, guiding guests to their places. So I saw the show, and it was groundbreaking. The theme was *Emmanuelle*: that French soft-porn movie from the seventies with the main character who had a big rattan chair. So the whole stage was all these kinds of thrones, chairs, and all the girls ended up in this living painting on the chairs. Very impressive, very beautiful. I was actually quite shocked and disappointed that we only had ten minutes of show! You know, when you make a collection, it really feels like giving birth, especially in school; it still does. I thought it was sad to celebrate that only for 10 minutes, but looking back 20 years later, I’m very happy 10 minutes is only 10 minutes, and sometimes even that’s too long. Veronique was my baptism, and I do miss her. I loved her work; I think she really engaged with Belgian women. It was a beautiful artistic world; I’m happy she who introduced me to it.

At the end of the day, Paris Fashion Week doesn’t mean much to me because I’m with Diesel opening Milan Fashion Week and then with Y/Project, which last season closed Paris Fashion Week. So for me these fashion weeks were just one never-ending fitting with models, and other things. The only thing I do is work, go home, have a glass of wine, and go to bed. I’m very focused. I used to really engage with it, though, because it’s a really nice platform to meet people, friends, colleagues, and people from the industry, and build connections. I don’t do it any more, but nevertheless I still love fashion week because I love the whole fact it’s a show; it’s really the moment where you can show your creativity – in its purest form – and deliver your message. This is why these runway moments are so important – it’s purely your message there. For certain houses that also means big sets, big music, a big show, but anything is possible – you do whatever you need to do to get your message through. At Diesel, we always have massive set designs because we are a lifestyle brand, and they really help reinforce the meaning of that within the luxury industry. At Y/Project, it’s quite the opposite, because our garments are really so explosive, and creative, quirky, conceptual and experimental that everything goes into that silhouette; I don’t need to add sets and extra things because I really want the silhouette to be the focus. They are two different approaches, and I love them both to be honest. It’s fun. Also, I’m always very excited when fashion week comes round to see what my colleagues are doing. It’s a nice moment of celebration, like a cherry on the cake.

Maggie Maurer
Model

The first Paris Fashion Week show I attended was Thom Browne Autumn/Winter 2017 menswear. I was in town for the first job that I did for the brand and they invited me to stay and attend the show the next day. I met [Thom Browne PR] Matthew Foley that day and ended up staying in his hotel room at the Regina so I could go to the show. We stayed up talking each other's face off until like 4am and eventually had to tell each other to stop so we could sleep. I remember meeting Daniel Roseberry for the first time at the show the next day. We took a beautiful black-and-white portrait of us together with some of the team. It was also where I met my darling Tim Blanks for the first time as I was sitting between him and Luke Leitch from *Vogue*. The show was slow and spectacular. I love being able to view this business from all perspectives. As a model it's not always easy to have that. But I think I add a little something extra if I am given a chance to participate in more than just my role.

Paris Fashion Week represents the highest level of achievement for those who have the chance to show there. It's the end of the month-long season, but I think it's what everybody waits for. Tired and exhausted as everyone is, you are nonetheless fuelled by an energy of curiosity, intrigue, desire. That energy is dangerously intoxicating and I wonder if we really need it? Do we need another show, another collection, another dinner, another fucking party? Probably not, but it's always the people who get me. That one passing hug, that little smile, the little half-tight hand grip from Daniel before I step out – small things that matter to me and keep me in it. Because fashion's got me and I am not sure I could live another way. With another job, another world? The fashion world is my world. For love and hate. I love to grow with it and be a part of its history.



Maybe
Creative directors

Kevin Tekinel

My first Paris Fashion Week show was Louis Vuitton Autumn/Winter 2012 by Marc Jacobs. A friend of mine snuck me in and told me not to sit anywhere. I did end up finding a seat seconds before the Vuitton train pulled into the 'station'. It was over the top, unforgettable, and made me happy to be (somehow) on the right track.

Charles Levai

The first Paris Fashion Week show I 'attended' was in 2013 when I walked the runway show of Franco-Japanese brand Julien David. I was still a student at the time and I was street cast. For me, being backstage (and on the runway) instead of in the audience was a first learning experience. It was exhilarating, maybe cringey, but still a good memory.

The picture above was taken backstage, minutes before the Coperni Spring/Summer 2023 show in Paris. We had to test the spray liquid on Bella's skin but only had half an hour, so we had to stop halfway through (hence the bra-like garment in the picture). We think enough has been said about this show and what it represents about fashion and Paris Fashion Week today, but on a personal level, it's an experience we will always cherish for its honesty. In the end, what's great about Paris is that it allows you to take risks.

Stella McCartney
Designer

I attended my first Paris show in 1988, aged 17, when I was interning with Christian Lacroix for his couture collections. It was an incredible spectacle to see and be part of all these fittings, which I would do down in this cellar just off Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. I remember doing fittings with Marie Seznec Martinez. She was so beautiful and incredibly chic, and held herself with such elegance; I just couldn't believe my eyes. I was sent to Maison Lesage to pick up embroideries, and I had to lace all the couture satin shoes for the show. I loved being part of the process, in the build-up to this extraordinary moment! All the ball gowns and the jewellery, these crosses and gold. It was so incredibly opulent and dramatic, and it all had such stature. All these incredible couture models were like 10 feet tall and so thin and just like nothing I'd ever seen in my life before. I was blown away by the colour and the fabrics and the jacquards and the taffeta and the bright pinks and the chokers and the velvets and brocades and these big beehive hairdos and just the hair and make-up – everything! Every detail was so incredibly precise. It was such a spectacle.

I spent those next few days after I finished interning with Lacroix going to other couture shows. I went to Chanel and sat on the front row, and nobody knew who I was. Everyone just kept looking! Those same photographers are now backstage at my shows. I remember them looking at me just completely dumbfounded, like, 'Who is this child on the front row?' It was so fascinating and I know I had no right to be there, even if I had no idea of the rules and regulations and the codes of conduct in the Paris fashion industry like I do today. I met Karl Lagerfeld afterwards, and I just felt so out of my depth. On reflection, I was so naive and innocent, and I was on my own, which was madness! I then went to Yves Saint Laurent, and I worked with Yves for a couple of days and was part of his couture show, which was the one with all the Picasso and the Georges Braque sequinned guitars [Spring/Summer 1988]. It was one of the most iconic collections ever.

Fast-forward to my Saint Martins years, when I was sneaking into all the Paris ready-to-wear shows, in through the back to get into Thierry Mugler shows, squeezing through the tents and any openings we could find to blag our way in. Going from couture to ready-to-wear was really quite an experience at such an early age. It was like a whole other world to the London shows because there I was with Lee McQueen and John Galliano, and just all my mates. They were a little older than me, but we were all a community of Brits, and the shows in London – especially led by Lee – were spectacles and theatrical experiences. They were all so dramatic, like art installations. Seeing Lee's shows in Paris was just a completely different experience, though. The Parisian fashion shows were like nowhere else on Earth. It was an unrepeatable moment because now the lines are more blurred, and the idea of putting on a fashion show is so different today. For a start, there were far fewer designers. I remember going to Jean Paul Gaultier's show at the circus. Just the venues! It all felt so precious and special because there weren't many houses. Today, you can leave the room and stumble into a fashion show.

All these different periods and stages in my life in Paris were landmark moments in my growth and career: from my first shows in Paris to my student days to my own career, my first ever runway fashion show and ready-to-wear collection. It was presented at the Opéra and I remember having over 2,000 people and more than 80 model exits and just not even knowing what I was in for. I had Kate, Naomi, Yasmin, Helena and every single model that you could ever think of. They were all my girlfriends! It was a very different moment for me because it was like I brought London to Paris. I was surrounded by my community of friends, from the same new generation, and we were taking over the city! I was also designing clothes that I wanted to wear, and that all my girlfriends wanted to wear. That was a very, very, very different moment. I think I was one of the first to bring suits, airbrushed T-shirts and tigers on the backs of jeans to Paris runways. I brought something to Paris that wasn't happening at the time.

Paris Fashion Week obviously still holds a level of respect. It's the greatest place to showcase your work, for a variety of reasons, and now it has an incredible breadth of offerings. I just had my show last season in the barracks under the Eiffel Tower, at one of the oldest equestrian centres in the world. To find that central location and to be able to use it and to have seven wild horses led by Jean-François Pignon – with just a tiny thread separating them and the models – I couldn't have done that in any city other than Paris. I think there's still a sense of freedom in Paris compared with other cities. There's an embrace of creativity and fashion in Paris that has always led the way.

‘Images taken when I styled my very first show. It was at Azzedine’s.’

Joe McKenna
Stylist

I styled my very first show. It was at Azzedine Alaïa. It was 1989 and it was 2am. This was a time when a supermodel at the top of her game would choose to take a week out to spend time doing fittings with Azzedine.

Alastair McKimm
Global editor in chief, *i-D*

The first show I attended was Yohji Yamamoto, Autumn/Winter 2001 ready-to-wear on 9 March 2001. It was the first time Yohji collaborated with Adidas. I remember there was no soundtrack, just the quiet footsteps of models in Adidas sneakers. It was quite revolutionary at the time.

Paris Fashion Week is the ultimate moment to experience the best-of-the-best fashion designers in the most beautiful city in the world.

Luke Meagher
Online fashion critic and host, HauteLeMode

The first show I attended at Paris Fashion Week was Givenchy's Fall 2019 ready-to-wear collection. I'll never forget being amazed at the layered pleated dresses and lettuce hems that Claire Waight Keller presented on that cold Parisian night.

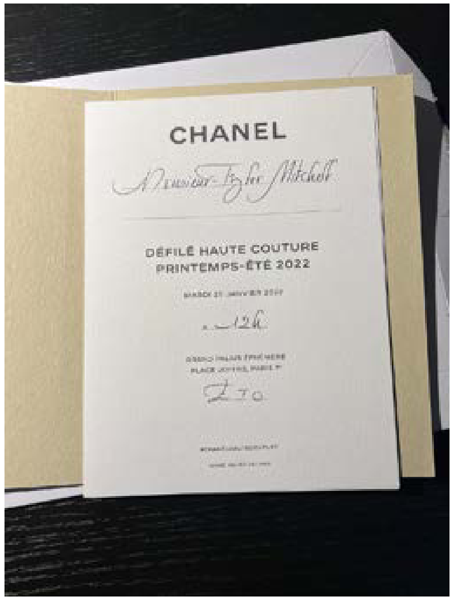
Paris Fashion Week in its modern context is the convergence of the global fashion industry. Designers from all over the world gather to show their collections in runway, presentation, or showroom format, and from the biggest and most expensive fashion show set to the smallest rack of clothes in a fifth-floor walk-up, it all allows us to become wrapped up in a designer's vision. The more global aspect of Paris Fashion Week has allowed fashion to reach the far-flung corners of the Earth and inspire the creatives from those places, too.

Photograph by Natasha Cowan.

Suzy Menkes
Fashion critic and journalist

When I was a fashion student in Paris, I was taken to see a Dior show. This was years and years ago, when it was very stiff and sticky. I already felt that I was completely out of place because I was so much younger then than everybody else, and then I did the most dreadful thing. I did a little squiggle in my notebook during the show, because I just liked it and I like moving my hands around, and then somebody came towards me and I thought, 'Oh, I wonder what they're going to say?' And she picked me up by the arm, dragged me out, said, '*En France*, we never allow people to make a copy of our work' – and flung me out. And I can assure you, I never forgot it.

Paris Fashion Week now represents the enormous number of different people in the world who are interested in fashion. They're all drawn to Paris because it's considered the absolute height of the whole medium.



CHANEL

Monsieur Tyler Mitchell

DÉFILÉ HAUTE COUTURE
PRINTEMPS-ÉTÉ 2022

à 12h

Tyler Mitchell
Photographer

The very first Paris Fashion Week show I ever attended was Comme des Garçons Spring/Summer 2019, so in late September 2018. I wasn't invited, so my friend Carlos Nazario snuck me in. It was my very first Paris Fashion Week, so I was sheepish and shy, but Carlos said, 'Just come!' Much to my surprise, the Comme show felt like (and still is, in my opinion) one of the most exclusive, intimate and artful experiences someone can have at Paris Fashion Week. It was such an honour to have that as my first experience. It started things off on a high note.

For me, Paris Fashion Week today is synonymous with pop culture, in a way. From the fanfare that takes place outside the shows to the uploading of pictures and videos to the internet *during* the shows, it almost feels like a flood of virality, with pop culture, art, fashion, and design, all clashing together. It also means friends and community. It's fun to arrive at these shows and realize that the people attending – the editors, the photographers, the artists, actors who adorn the front row or go to the show – are truly friends and people I work with and know. So, it also represents a level of community, as much as it does this sort of pop-culture, viral phenomenon.

Off-White Spring/Summer 2023.

Photograph by Josefine Meier.

Pascal Morand
Executive president, Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode

The very first fashion show I attended was Yves Saint Laurent's Autumn/Winter 1987 haute-couture collection. I was about to take up my post as director general of the Institut Français de la Mode alongside Pierre Bergé, and knew very little about fashion. I was dazzled by the emotion of shapes, materials and colours, and realized that fashion could be an art. Six months later I was amazed by Yves Saint Laurent's collection paying homage to artists, by the dialogue of his imagination with Van Gogh and Braque. My first Yohji Yamamoto show, in September 1987, was another shock. To me, he represented a contemporary aesthetic movement nourished by culture and respectful of diversity. I like Goethe's saying that a work of art emerges when the artist transcends his genre. It is what is strongest in fashion and in the creation that both accompanies and, to a certain extent, transcends it.

Paris Fashion Week's singularity lies in its plurality, its cosmopolitanism, its openness to the world, and its influence, which all stem from a natural authority. Of course, this is also due to the presence of major brands, and is a factor of attractiveness that goes hand in hand with the democracy and culture of respect seen in the official calendar. Federation members and carefully selected guest brands of all origins, sizes, and nationalities serenely coexist in it. More than ever, Paris Fashion Week is a melting pot that, while structured, leaves plenty of room for spontaneity. Recent years have also seen the deployment of 'augmented creativity' in catwalk shows and presentations, whether in physical settings or through creative videos. The physical world inevitably predominates, but it is now continuously supported by digital technology, which increases the shows' global resonance. Paris Fashion Week is a showcase for creative fashion that is as multifaceted as it is embodied, one that takes in the widest possible range of skills. It is a high point for cultural vitality and synergies with a major economic impact because they have meaning and are perceived as such.

Amina Muaddi
Footwear designer

One of the shows that I remember most vividly was Azzedine Alaïa's at his studio in the Marais. I don't think it was the first that I ever attended a show in Paris, but it was definitely my first Alaïa. It was well known in the industry that Mr Azzedine was a rebel and disregarded the official fashion-week calendar, showing his collections when he thought they were ready and not abiding by the rules. He created his own codes and timeless iconic pieces that remain inspirational to this day. It was also my first time seeing a show by a talented couturier from a similar background to mine, who paid homage to his roots and culture though his work, and was globally renowned for it. Needless to say he was a huge inspiration to me; I was so happy to attend that show.

Paris Fashion Week has changed a lot in the past 10 to 15 years. It has gone from a niche, elitist presentation of collections to a massive form of mainstream media and a tool of communication that goes beyond the clothes. In a week crammed with shows and presentations, designers often have to find new ways to showcase their work and have their moment to shine, while expressing their creativity and individualism. We are now talking to a clientele and public that is extremely impatient, consumes fashion and products fast, and gets bored very easily. Paris is still the most coveted fashion week and the main home of luxury, alongside Milan. There is a sense of glamour, beauty and grandeur there that cannot be replicated anywhere else. Paris Fashion Week is still the period when fashion dreams are created and showcased in one of the most magical cities in the world. It's a combination that cannot be duplicated.

Harry Nuriev
Founder and creative director, Crosby Studios

The first Paris Fashion Week show I ever attended was Balenciaga Spring/Summer 2022 in October 2021. We had just moved to Paris. The show took place at the Théâtre de Châtelet, which added to the overall allure and ambience of the experience. The unique concept of involving the guests in the show made it truly memorable.

Fashion today represents not only fashion. It has been transformed into an entertainment resource, extending beyond clothing to captivate diverse audiences with its artistic and creative elements. I find that very positive.

Lynette Nylander
Executive editorial director, Dazed Media

I can't say this for sure but I think my very first Paris Fashion Week show would have been a Gareth Pugh show when he was on the Paris schedule, around 2009 or 2010. I was an assistant to [fashion consultant] Mandi Lennard and in town to help her with a dinner she was coordinating, and I remember having enough time the next day to sneak into the show. I was incredibly nervous about being found out as a stowaway and couldn't see much from my standing position, but I remembering thinking this is what I had imagined a fashion show to be. It felt unlike what I had seen in London. It commanded attention and assaulted the senses, in a good way. It was one of the things that made me understand the power that a good show experience can have on the perception of a collection.

Paris Fashion Week still remains the definitive fashion week. The ideas you see traverse beauty, reality, and twisted fantasy. I find the show experience overwhelming at times but the calibre of Paris shows mean you can connect with ideas and the spirit of the designer or designers. While I would love to see a younger generation of designers supported and able to thrive and show in the city, Paris represents the very best in craftsmanship and refinement.

Agnès b. and Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2019

Hans Ulrich Obrist
Curator and artistic director, Serpentine Galleries, London

The first fashion show I ever attended was agnès b.'s, sometime in the mid-nineties. Agnès and I had been introduced through the artist Christian Boltanski. When we first discussed the idea of doing a kind of hybrid magazine-poster edition together, which became the *Point d'ironie*. It's been going for decades now.

For me, going to the agnès b. shows, and becoming friends with Agnès, was synonymous with the many rich encounters I had at the time with people from different fields. Because Agnès has never only been a fashion designer – she's also a photographer, a filmmaker, the founder of an art institution called La Fab. She has always created such an interdisciplinary environment. Through Agnès, I met a very young Harmony Korine who was living in Paris at the time; she introduced me to the great pioneer of cinema, Jonas Mekas, who became a mentor to me on all things related to film; and through her, I met Martiniquais poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant, who became such a big influence on my life.

Looking back on that period now, it was very special to experience all these fields connecting within the context of a fashion show. It's something I think we take for granted today – with the art, architecture, design and music worlds all congregating at the shows – but back then it was new, rare, exciting and inspiring. We have Agnès to thank for that.

Phil Oh
Photographer

I had crashed a few shows in Paris by putting on an accent and saying I was from *Nylon* Japan. It worked at smaller shows without dedicated Asian PR teams, but the first fashion show I can actually remember being invited to was Issey Miyake, where my trick obviously wasn't going to fly anyway. I couldn't see much, being sat in Row ZZ but I do recall that Kanye West was there. This was pre-circus so he didn't have an entourage and I'm not sure the French paparazzi knew who he was, but afterwards I asked him for a photo together. He politely declined but then I go, 'but… I'm from Chi-Town, too!' So he begrudgingly agreed. His bodyguard said not to touch him. Anyway, somewhere on Getty Images, there's a photo captioned 'Kanye West and Friend' at the Issey Miyake runway show…

Even though I've been going to Paris for 15-plus years now, I still feel like an outsider, and luxury fashion and the industry itself never really interested me that much anyway. To me, it's just another day on the job site; it may as well be a Belle Époque office park in suburban Phoenix, but with better food. Though a less jaded take would be that I do appreciate how much more diverse the scene in Paris is compared to back in the mid-2000s when I started. I could also say something about hyper-capitalism, post-colonialism, et cetera, but I'm not smart enough to articulate any of that.

Rick Owens, with Fecal Matter, and the Clermont Twins.

Courtesy of OWENSCORP.

Rick Owens
Designer

The first runway show that I ever went to was Jean Paul Gaultier, and it was in the nineties; I don't know which show it was. I've looked but I can't really recognize it. I went because a friend of mine from LA, Eugenie Vincent, had been his fit model for a while, so she was in the show and she got us in. Getting in was easy because Lionel, the legendary PR guy for Gaultier, was very attentive and made sure that we got in. I went with Daphné, my assistant because we were in Paris to show my collection to buyers. We got into the show and everybody was standing around, and we just went and sat down in the front row because we didn't know seats were reserved. We were just sitting there when Lionel came and yelled at me and, you know, I felt really stupid. But anyway, *that* was my first show.

Paris fashion will always demand a certain amount of poetry. Dada was born here. Symbolism. The most extreme forms of poetry, the most abstract, I think, have been embraced here in Paris. And I don't know why exactly because it can be so conservative sometimes. But that's the kind of almost perversity demanded of fashion here, and that's the kind of fashion I want to see, and that's the kind of fashion I want to be motivated to present. I don't think that's going to change. Perversity and fashion can come in a lot of varieties. We've seen fashion that can be challenging and difficult to digest, and it's supposed to be – it's supposed to challenge the generation before it. If you're not offended, it's not working.

Lucien Pagès
Founder, Lucien Pagès Communication

My first memory of Paris Fashion Week was when I was a student. I arrived in Paris and there was a show at the famous Cour Carrée, inside the Louvre. As a student, we were trying to get into the shows without tickets and the first one I succeeded to get into was Rocco Barocco. It was a terrible show. I always remember there was a fake Liz Taylor attending the show. She was in the second row, so it was really easy to see that this was not the real Liz Taylor who would obviously have been front row.

Paris Fashion Week was always important. I remember when I arrived in Paris, the city was already the *capitale de la mode*. But now, with the industry becoming so important, all the big groups are based in France, and most of them are competing at the top level to do the biggest and buzziest show. You feel that Paris is really where it's happening, even though I love to do the other fashion weeks. There is a tension in Paris. There is something stronger. Of course, for us, it's a marathon, yet full of energy. You feel that if a brand wants to succeed now, it has to succeed in Paris.

Chanel, Autumn/Winter 2017, at the Grand Palais, Paris.

Pierre A. M'Pelé, aka Pam Boy
Head of editorial content, *GQ France*

My first fashion show was my first Chanel show. It was Autumn/Winter 2017. The space-rocket show. I cried because Karl Lagerfeld has always been my hero. I discovered fashion and Chanel while looking for cartoons on TV as a teenager. Fashion TV became my obsession. So, to be in the Grand Palais in Paris and witness his greatness is one of my favourite fashion memories.

Paris is still the undeniable capital of fashion. Over the past few years, the calendar has evolved to include unexpected names and international talents who are reshaping the way we think about our industry.

Rafael Pavarotti

Photographer

COLLEZIONI
DONNA
WITH ENGLISH TEXT
TENDENZE
COSA VA
accessori
le idee vincenti
TRENDS
WHAT'S HOT
accessories
the winning ideas
Dandy New Romantic
straordinaria
Moda in Sfilata
AUTUMN WINTER
extraordinary
Shows
1000 PHOTOS
MILANO & PARIS
Madrid Barcelona

Max Pearmain

Stylist

I'm not 100% sure when my first show was, but it would have been some time in the early 2010s. That period of consistently going to the shows has blurred somewhat in my mind, but I feel like my most relevant memories of the Paris shows actually come from more formative, earlier years, thanks to *Collezioni* magazine, which used to magically appear in the local WHSmith, sometime around 2002. I used to spend an age trawling through the pages – browsing not buying because it was something mad like £24.95 – giving equal time to trying to see what the audience, often just in shot, was wearing as much as the models. Parisian shows that stood out included all the usual suspects: Helmut Lang, Raf, Margiela, and Walter Van Beirendonck. The idea of these collections happening in Paris definitively translated – you could tell even through print that it was all infinitely cooler than the Milan or London shows. Paris felt tighter, quicker and sharper, and felt like a place to aim for.

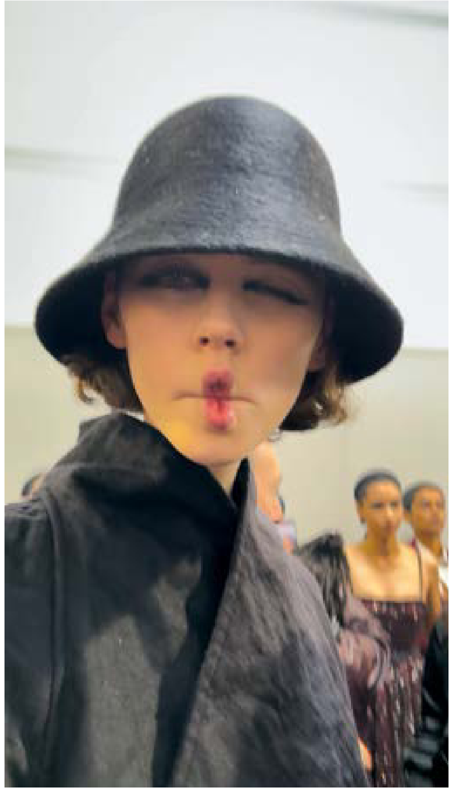
Paris represents potential to me. There's a very rich baseline of culture there – it surrounds you – and there's a strong expectation of that being inherently part of the city's personality. You're expected to know about beauty. It's something I have a lot of respect for – a certain democratic elitism if you like.

Charlotte Rampling and Tilda Swinton in *Sur-exposition*, conceived by Olivier Saillard, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2016.

Julie Pelipas
Founder and creative director, Bettter

I remember my first show was Rick Owens and I felt like a kid. I was enormously excited. The show's scale and concept was just so mind-blowing for me in that moment; it remains vivid. I remember that there was the feeling of something fundamental about why the show existed, why so many people put so much effort into it over four months in order to represent their work. I still believe that the show evokes that: the huge amount of work behind any product. That's why it's really important to maintain this format, I believe.

Today, Paris Fashion Week represents the ever-changing climate of the industry. In Paris, you can feel that more than in any other city. It's like a mark-up, with all the subtle changes taking place in the industry there to be seen. We can literally see them and feel them. It's a forecast of what we're going to have in the future – and the essence of what fashion represents today.



Peter Philips
Make-up artist, and creative and image director, Christian Dior Makeup

During the Autumn 1998 Paris Fashion Week I did my first two shows, starting with Olivier Theyskens and a few days later, Veronique Branquinho. For Olivier's show, I was kind of heavy-handed on the make-up, lots of contouring. I had made lashes out of cashmere thread from one of Olivier's fabrics. It was a great experience – stressful, exciting, and memorable.

Paris Fashion Week is the one true fashion week, because the city is like a host that offers a platform for any style of fashion from anywhere in the world. New York Fashion Week feels more corporate and is very much about New York; London Fashion Week is very much about the London scene. So for me, Paris Fashion Week could be seen as the mother of all fashion weeks. With changing times and the growing appeal of fashion worldwide, all the other fashion weeks are becoming more and more important, so it's key that Paris Fashion Week stays relevant. But never underestimate the power of this town's charm to guarantee fashion week's staying power.

Backstage at the Valentino Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 show.

Pierpaolo Piccioli
Creative director, Valentino

I remember it well. I had started working at Valentino only two weeks before and Mr Giammetti invited me to join the *maison* in Paris for the haute-couture show. For the first time I had the chance to experience all the rituals of couture in an almost sacred atmosphere. Mr Valentino's preview of the show was *already* the show. Everything was perfect; all the details were impeccable. There is a second reason that makes this memory so important to me. I had left for Paris with great news from my wife, Simona – she was pregnant with Pietro.

Paris, caught in the creative chaos of fashion week, is a second home for me and my community. I look at the city and its mundanity from an affectionate and emotional point of view. Yet, I see it constantly changing and evolving. What was once a very restricted theatre has become a window on the world, and this international, dynamic dimension is what makes it still so relevant for the whole fashion system.

Vanessa Reid
Stylist

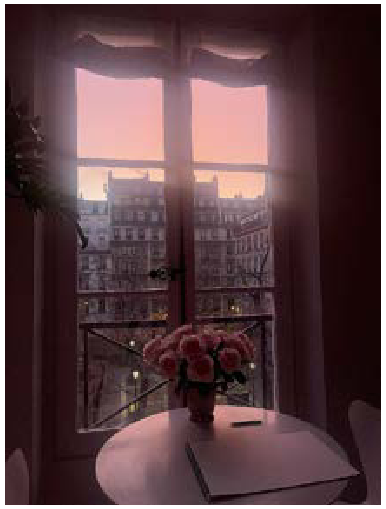
I was living in Paris, during my year abroad from university, and had the incredible luck of experiencing the Martin Margiela Autumn/Winter 2000 show as my first Paris show. It was at an abandoned train station and I remember it being very dark and damp. I was fresh on the scene and had blagged my way in with a friend. I had very few reference points as I had never been to a fashion show before. The XXXL oversize silhouettes, the anonymity of the girls hidden behind long fringes, the slow walk, the lights going on and off, the sexy soundtrack – the vibe was surreal and it all felt very radical. I was hooked. It was only later on that I realized how groundbreaking that show had been and how much it continues to be a huge inspiration for designers today.

Paris is undoubtedly at the centre of the fashion industry and its fashion week is continuously ballooning out of proportion, so that it holds more and more sway on the direction that fashion travels globally. The combination of a renewed buzz in the air post-pandemic and the iconic legacy of a city associated with fashion more than any other, provides a ripe backdrop for the media and celebrity circus prioritizing Paris as its favourite fashion venue. Paris Fashion Week's influence stems ultimately from the power structures generated by the big groups, which ensures that luxury fashion feels very much at home there.

Gaia Repossi
Creative director, Repossi

It must have been in 2007, a Chanel couture show with Karl. I remember that it was so crowded that I lost my front row seat for a minute. I was never late to a show again!

Paris Fashion Week is a moment to present and get an idea, and form make an opinion on the new trends, to feel the future. It is a moment to strengthen links between different branches of the industry – between people and the objects we create – and for the key people with the vision of the future of the industry and fashion to set the tone. You have to read between the commercial lines, the frenzy and the intense rhythm of the weeks.



Daniel Roseberry
Artistic director, Schiaparelli

The first fashion show I ever attended was a Rick Owens show years ago, before he started showing at the Palais de Tokyo. I didn't know a soul and was happy to be an anonymous witness to the whole thing. The thing I remember the most is the pure energy of the experience. I could feel the beat in my chest, there was fog in the air – and everyone was huddled together in one big hot midday mass of anticipation and eagerness. It felt like being in high school at a pep rally, with everyone's feet thumping on the bleachers, when the lights went out and the music started blasting through the speakers behind your head. It was terrifying, but it still drew me in.

Paris Fashion Week is all just so much, so unrelenting. Couture week feels so civilized, and ready-to-wear just feels like a savage jungle. People are both exhausted by the excess and yet still desperate to experience something special – something to make them feel. The scale feels ever bigger, and more and more un-special, and maybe more and more forgettable. It's so hard to create something that matters to people today – and even harder to have them ready to feel something back in return. Fashion shows absolutely no sign of slowing down; it's just more and more stuff, and fewer and fewer feels.

Clockwise from left: Renzo entering the Maison Margiela couture show wearing a teaser T-shirt of the Diesel campaign 'Haute Couture (Hate Couture)'. Renzo at two different Viktor&Rolf shows, one with actress Jessica Chastain, the other with singer Katy Perry.

Renzo Rosso
Founder, Diesel, and president, OTB

One of my most noteworthy memories of Paris Fashion Week is related to a specific season, Autumn/Winter 2002, the season when Diesel's collaboration with Karl Lagerfeld for his Lagerfeld Gallery collection debuted on the catwalk. The experience of working with Karl (a self-confessed Diesel fan) matched my pride in seeing our denim know-how exalted on such a catwalk, on statue-like, tall and slender Amazons; it was like a dream. I had met Karl previously, at the opening of our Étienne Marcel store in Paris, but seeing him on the catwalk wearing his Lagerfeld Gallery by Diesel jeans was a unique moment. In the same season, I was invited to a John Galliano show for the first time. The event was the usual magical spectacle that only he can create, but then I was taken backstage, in the *privé* of the *privé* to meet with John, our first time together, well ahead of our working together on Margiela. Karl and John: to me no one represents Paris Fashion Week better than those two icons.

Paris Fashion Week represents fashion par excellence, backed by its unique haute couture, which is getting stronger and stronger. Paris is the highest expression of women's fashion, though as an Italian, I am also proud of how Milan is proving more than fair competition!

Etienne's own Rick Owens Foal Boots.

Etienne Russo
Founder and creative director, Villa Eugénie

After modelling for Kansai Yamamoto in Tokyo in the early eighties (probably 1984), I was booked to walk in his show at the Cour Carrée in the Louvre for Paris Fashion Week. I have vivid memories of my six-inch punk mohawk hairstyle, and Kansai leading the show from the runway in an almond-green ninja outfit.

Paris Fashion Week's hegemony has been unchallenged since its inception in the early seventies. The richness, breadth and eclecticism of the brands that show remains unparalleled. Not to mention, haute-couture collections: a symbol of prestige and exceptional know-how, only shown in Paris. Paris Fashion Week is the undisputed ground for creative expression for the most prestigious houses, as well as for young designers from everywhere in the world. It is the premier league of creativity, daring, innovation and talent. Every season, I witness the constant evolution of this increasingly powerful vector of brand image, brand experience and sales that the shows have become. Storytelling is the driving force, connecting brands to their target audience and showing who they are and what they stand for. It's all designed to create an emotional connection – and a fashion show embodies and magnifies that experience. Each show exists well before and long after the moment itself. The guests in the room, though privileged, represent only a minority of those who see and receive the message. Technological innovation makes it possible to add ever-more layers of content, to create an almost infinite number of communication sequences. A domino effect from physical to digital to metaverse.

Olivier Saillard
Curator and artistic director, J.M. Weston

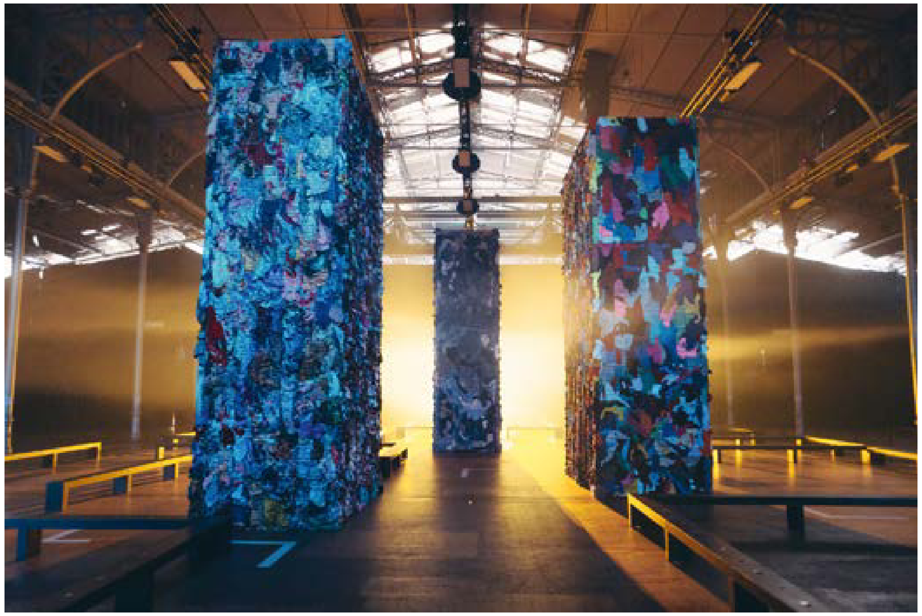
I don't remember the exact season or year, but it was in the late eighties, maybe 1987, when there were still the tents in the Cour Carrée at the Louvre where the majority of designers showed. I vividly remember seeing my first Jean Paul Gaultier show at La Villette and it was a revelation. On a sort of giant scaffolding construction, the day's or the moment's models climbed up and down a metallic platform. The counter-casting, the other forms of beauty that Gaultier implicitly inventoried, the clothing, the music, the spirit, et cetera, made everything else look out of touch. I found there the reason why I had come to Paris with so much hope.

Paris Fashion Week today inspires nothing good in me. I see a crowd of people in front of the shows, screaming for a selfie like we're at Cannes. Guests who are not invited. The clothes on show now secondary. Inside, the show begins with the arrival of the pseudo-stars who don't even have the taste to dress with their own taste. Little by little, I stopped going. This moment of discovery and design, of friendship and smiles, had become a place of exclusion. On the other hand, I think Paris is still the place to find the most interesting fashion proposals, where the creative spirit reigns in a wide variety of styles.

Rachel Scott
Founder and creative director, Diotima

I was working at Costume National as an assistant designer, so my first fashion week was, I believe, in January 2007 with Costume. And I cried afterwards!

Paris Fashion Week is ground zero. It's really the Mecca of fashion. It's like being in the birthplace, in the epicentre of fashion.



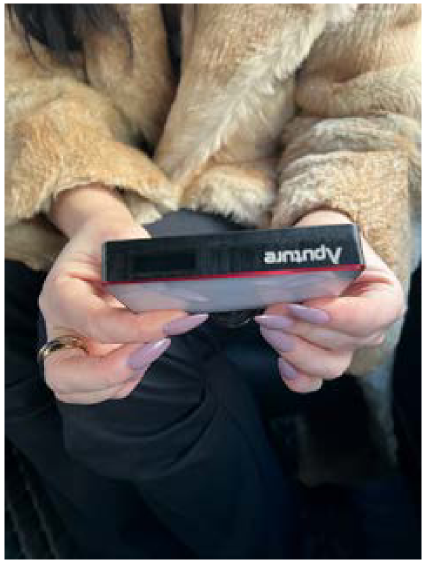
‘Piles of vintage clothing that we use for upcycling at my Autumn/Winter 2023 runway show, *Rising Shelter*.
The three oppressive towers are an echo of our own absurd destruction of this planet,
but also our will to step-up for a better future.’

Marine Serre
Designer

Back when I was at Maison Margiela’s studio with Matthieu Blazy, I had the incredible opportunity to witness my very first Paris Fashion Week show from backstage. The collection showcased was Spring/Summer 2014 haute couture. The concept behind it was all about taking bits and pieces from other times and places, and bringing them into the present, creating a sense of freedom and expression. I was amazed at how we could meld street graffiti with traditional tailoring techniques, pushing the limits to elevate the ordinary. It was then that I realized I had found my calling: discovering the preciousness in the un-precious. And that’s why my main mission is upcycling. Nowadays, I firmly believe that beauty can be found everywhere.

I refused to enter Paris Fashion Week and compromise my values, so I did it my way. First, I asked myself: ‘How can I use this opportunity without being used?’ In other words, ‘How can I stay true to my values?’ Out of respect for the Earth and others, I decided to take a step, at my scale. At fashion week, every collection has a different slot: men, women, ready-to-wear, couture. I decided to fit it all into a single, unique show. Because why overproduce? Sure, it takes time and organization, and it’s not easy – but it’s possible. And anyway, why should I divide clothing based on gender in the first place?

Photograph by Boby, @odieuxboby.



Olivia Singer
Global editorial director, *i-D*

I can’t remember the first show I ever attended, but I can remember my first Comme des Garçons womenswear show – Autumn/Winter 2017 – because I felt so incredibly lucky to get a ticket. It was towards the beginning of Rei making her ‘not-clothes’ and she sent out models trapped in these Venus de Milo-style sculptures, their arms trapped within sculptural parodies of feminine curves; she called it ‘the future of silhouette’. I’d been to menswear shows in Paris and in Milan, but I’d never seen anything that felt as reflective or that provoked such reflection in me about fashion and femininity and womanhood. I’d also never experienced a fashion audience quite like that: everyone was so quietly concentrated and reverent. I haven’t missed one since.

Paris Fashion Week feels like it’s split into two halves: the more independent designers who have doubled down on their core values and creativity – Comme, Rick, Junya, and a new guard like Wales Bonner and Vaquera – and those who, for one reason or another, have scaled things up to an astonishing degree of theatrics, both within the show space and outside with the crowds their front rows summon. I sort of love both; I really don’t want to fall into the camp of thinking that fashion should be kept small or secretive or artificially intimate, because I love how many eyes the theatrics can draw to what people send onto their runways – but it does change what a show is for, and what it means. There’s something fascinating about pop culture’s intersection with fashion, or how the industry has now become a part of pop. When that’s authentic it can make for something that feels really exciting and creative and new. When it’s forced, though – when the spectacle feels as though it’s the result of a boardroom strategy about increasing handbag sales – it feels astonishingly hollow. I always think Virgil did big best, because the complete spectacle of his Louis Vuitton always made perfect sense with what he was trying to say. That’s where one of these photos is from; his first show there, where it was big and impactful and inclusive, and everyone from Rihanna to local students came to watch. The world felt like it had changed. The other photo is of Fiona’s portable flash, which she used to illuminate celebrities in the front row and film for *i-D*, while we interrogated the ones we thought might have something interesting to say. We sort of think of it like our MTV. I like that someone might start watching a video because we open with a musician or actor they love, and then might end up watching our perspective on the runway and reading what we made of it.

Martine Sitbon
Designer

The first show I vividly remember attending was Vivienne Westwood's first show in Paris in the early eighties [Autumn/Winter 1983]. It took place very early in the morning in this cosy, yet old-fashioned Parisian tea room, Angelina. It was small, intimate – and sensational. The setting in that mythical space already gave you a hint of Vivienne's unconventional touch and undeniable freedom. The girls came down a small staircase into the room with dirndls over padded skirts. Underwear became outerwear. The collection was an accumulation of different techniques, tailoring, sport. There was this incredible energy with Malcolm McLaren's modern, innovative music on the speakers, this mix of hip-hop and scratching: 'Buffalo Gals.' What struck me was the strong contrast between the choice of location and the collection. It was bold at the time especially in Paris, the capital of couture. Vivienne did what she fiercely believed in, with a real desire to change the world.

With the opening of new markets, luxury is now sprawling and fashion has become increasingly global. At that time, the pace was very different. Fashion was about creation; it had a deeper significant value. Being a part of it was almost like being a 'connoisseur'. No matter the scale, you would create and design to bring change and break a current. Technology changed that. Today with social media you don't feel the exclusivity of it as much; it feels more accessible. From the viewpoint of someone who is profoundly passionate about the subject, this 'new' accessibility is a real playground for eccentricity. Paris remains a force and a platform.

'At Kim Jones' Dior Spring/Summer 2020 menswear show, featuring Daniel Arsham's DIOR sculpture.'

Jerry Stafford
Stylist and creative director, Première Heure

The first iconic shows I saw were in London mainly in the mid-eighties – Westwood (*Savages*), BodyMap (*Barbie Takes a Trip*), Ozbek (the 'white' show), and Galliano's first shows. When I arrived in Paris I gravitated to Christian Lacroix Spring/Summer 1989 – my first couture show – invited by model Marie Sophie Wilson, one of that unparalleled generation of models that also included Christine Bergström, Marpessa Hennink, Anne Rohart, Iman, Dalma Callado, and Diane deWitt. Other memorable shows in my first seasons were of course off-schedule Alaïa shows, with Tina Turner, Farida and Jill Jones; Thierry Mugler revues with Diana Ross, Tippi Hedren, Julie Goodyear, Amanda Lear, Linda and Christy and Lypsinka; and JPG extravaganzas with Neneh Cherry, Leslie Winer, Naomi and of course… Tanel! ❤️❤️

Paris fashion shows were fun back in the day: joyful, subversive, and intelligent. They are now a chore and best left to a generation of desperate narcissists and charmless profiteers.

Balenciaga Autumn/Winter 2022.

Sub
Architectural design studio and research centre

Niklas Bildstein Zaar

I used to live in Paris and it felt like there were fashion shows all the time then, like now. I kind of vaguely remember these galleries in the Marais, always hosting some kind of show, but no clarity on what or whom. Early visual saturation, LOL. I feel like it's an industry attempting to recontextualize itself. It finds itself suspended in this vacuum of trying to be both accessible and welcoming, yet exclusive and selective. It's a giving contortionist.

Balenciaga Spring/Summer 2020.

Andrea Faraguna

The first show I attended in Paris was Balenciaga Autumn/Winter 2018. I remember how I had never before experienced so much attention accumulated in one place, producing an energy both exhilarating and terrifying. I had to go to sleep right after. If fashion is a mirror of the collective body and as such has become a platform for political and social commentary, Paris Fashion Week captures the contemporary, transmitting its sense of dissonance. The extreme focus generated in a physical location and a specific moment in time has something exquisite but also rudimentary about it, creating a unique opportunity to feel the intuition and desires that people are still processing and developing.

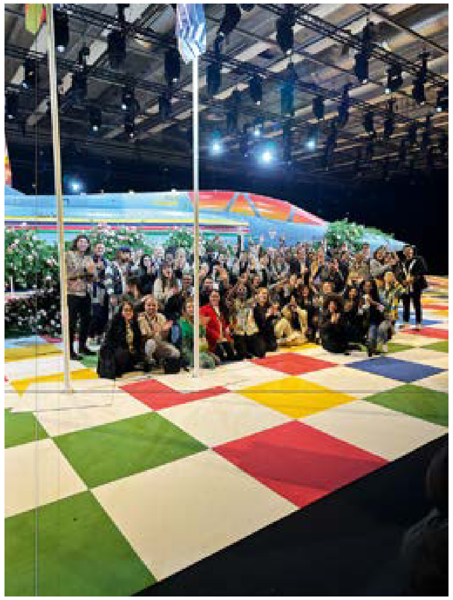
Tyrone Dylan Susman
Model and Rick Owens collaborator

My first Paris Fashion Week show was in 2018: Jean Paul Gaultier couture. I had moved to Paris a few months prior. Coming from Australia, I dreamed as a fashion student of attending such an extraordinary runway. I studied Gaultier at university, so having the opportunity to sit front row and experience such a moment of a house I admire so close up was surreal. I remember thinking I was living my Parisian fantasy. The chaos of the photographers out front. The pounding music. The wild style of guests attending. The vibe, both inside and on the street, was equally as exhilarating. I didn't know where to look. It was a sensory overload. Sitting among the fashion identities I had only ever seen in magazines and online was an experience I will never forget. The theatrical nature of a Gaultier show is unlike other brands. The models cascade down the runway as performers as they reveal their looks. Utterly glamorous, and unforgettable.

Paris Fashion Week is the height of luxury. Historically and today, Paris will always be the epitome of glamour and style for me. It is Disneyland for adults in the fashion landscape. Paris is flexing post-pandemic. Luxury is prevalent. There's excess. The magnitude and hype that goes into the runways, the parties, and events is the industry coming back with a vengeance. However, some have chosen to consider and story-tell sensitively. There is drama on both scales of the spectrum. This exclusive community comes together to tell their story, whatever that may be. Paris Fashion Week informs a mood and sensation. When I lived in Australia, I viewed it as trend-setting. Now that I live in Paris, I see an attitude of stirring the pot and expressing your story, and being celebrated as an individual.

Portrait of Susman by Julien Da Costa for *GQ*.

CASA BLANCA
FOR THE PEACE



Charaf Tajer
Founder and creative director, Casablanca

The first Paris Fashion Week show I attended was Rick Owens Autumn/Winter 2005 at the Palais de Tokyo. I was an intern and was backstage helping my friend's mum who was producing the shows. I felt it was crazy how some people can express themselves in such extreme ways *and* make it a viable business. Rick Owens is really far from my aesthetic, but I realized that you could express yourself *and* reflect your community and point of view. My life changed from that moment on.

Paris Fashion Week is very important to me and to the world. It's where the biggest houses show; it is the historic centre of fashion. The city has history and is aligned with the past yet leading to the future, so you can feel and understand fashion better. The people we admire in fashion grew up and worked in Paris and are responsible for the industry we have today. In a way, it is the Silicon Valley of fashion. A small city, but the epicentre of fashion.

Left: ‘Celebrating my daughter Lala’s birthday at Yen restaurant.
When I joined Paris Fashion Week in 2002, she was six months old and came to the Undercover show in a stroller.’
Right: ‘This is producer Mr. Wakatsuki, during rehearsals for the show. He’s been helping me since 1994.’

Jun Takahashi
Founder and designer, Undercover

It was Comme des Garçons Spring/Summer 2003. It was a stunning show with twisted and braided fabrics. I especially vividly remember the moment when the simple white T-shirt with the heart print appeared to the public for the first time: Play Comme des Garçons, which now is one of their signature lines.

Paris Fashion Week has its history, and I have witnessed the moments reflecting each era every season. The big fashion houses represent traditional *mode*, the transition between switching creative directors; then there are houses that have independent creation and perspectives like me. There are a variety of brands with different philosophies, and they are lined up on a calendar equally, which I think is the best part of Paris Fashion Week. I want to establish my position and world among others, which only I can create.

Róisín Tapponi with Raf Simons, January 2023.

Róisín Tapponi
Curator and critic

I cannot remember the first Paris Fashion Week show I attended, which doesn’t bode well because I’m in my twenties. Definitely in my teens, or around the time I briefly tried my hand at modelling, signing with Storm. As for memorable moments, I feel like I soft-launched my relationship at the Loewe show during Paris Fashion Week in October 2021. Last season, I found the Alaïa show at Pieter [Mulier]’s home in Antwerp extremely touching and meaningful. It wasn’t in Paris, but the whole experience evoked the historical notion of the salon, which is deeply Parisian. It was a small crowd of his genuine friends. There was little posting and almost no networking. We all hung out beforehand on his balcony.

I struggle to distinguish between any of the fashion weeks. I attend as a guest, so I am not an expert, but the lack of geographical specificity is perhaps something to do with globalization or our general condition of late capitalism, which has a homogenizing effect. I have similar experiences at all the fashion weeks and I see the same people. However, these people are my friends and I am deeply inspired by clothes, so I always have a good time! I get so excited when I watch a show and can identify where the idea is coming from. For example, there were James Ensor carnival paintings exhibited at KMSKA, the museum location for the Alaïa post-show dinner, and Matthieu [Blazy]’s next Bottega Veneta show is clearly drawing from the same source. So while fashion weeks can feel quite non-specific, I am interested in the transnational cultural links that are made with other cities and other brands elsewhere.

Kirsten Owen, *Helmut Lang Backstage* series, Spring/Summer 1994, Paris, 1993.

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Juergen Teller
Photographer

My first shows were some time in the early nineties. I can't remember exactly which season, but I do remember seeing the shows of Helmut Lang, Martin Margiela, and Jean Colonna. It was really eye-opening to experience the energy and excitement that these designers were bringing to Paris. It wasn't so much a fashion moment as a cultural statement for the times.

'4:39pm, Monday 6 March 2023, after Sacai Autumn/Winter 2023-2024,
32 Quai de Grenelle, 75015 Paris.'

Dan Thawley
Editor in chief, *A Magazine Curated By*

One of the first fashion shows I remember seeing in Paris was Rick Owens' Autumn/Winter 2009 menswear show at the Salle Melpomène in the Beaux-Arts building on Quai de Seine. It has a wonderful skylight ceiling framed with gilded paintings. It used to be a very common venue for fashion shows, but not so much these days. The collection was called *Crust*. The set was a lot simpler than his productions are today, yet still very brutalist and dramatic. There was a white scrim set up with a single beam of white light tracing along the floor at the base. The models walked out and did a U-shape on a simple dark felt floor, walking to the strains of a Strauss opera. My most remarkable memory of that show – other than the disbelief of being there in person after years of loyalty to Rick's world – was a pair of models in black and dark brown floor-length cashmere sweater dresses worn with gilded antlers around their necks. It was such an incredibly beautiful and primal gesture, and so strangely opulent. This was before I had ever seen Rick's furniture and, to me, it was an important glimpse into the worlds of fashion and industrial design colliding. Paris Fashion Week today represents a hyper-charged version of fashion week from both a creative and commercial point of view. Perhaps other cities tend to tip in one direction or another, but I think Paris tackles both head-on. Everyone bets on Paris. It is the pinnacle of the season. It is about proximity to the birthplace of luxury. It has historically welcomed designers from other countries, so it is a true international melting pot and has been since the late 1980s. In the same day at Paris Fashion Week, you can see drippy clothes for grungy clubkids, eveningwear for aristocrats, boho gear for yummy mummies, rock'n'roll tailoring, and that's all before the first cocktail party. So many things happen at once, people truly do move in different tribes linked to aesthetics and visual cultures, and I think in Paris the scale of the city helps to allow all that to happen in a fluid way. I am lucky as a journalist to witness both the grandeur of the big players and the more radical projects of small, emerging players, and in Paris, nearly all of that happens in about a five-kilometre radius.

Tommy Ton
Photographer

The first show I ever attended in Paris was the Balmain Fall 2007 show at the Hotel Westin on Rue de Castiglione. I actually wasn't invited; I just was waiting patiently with a group of eager fashion enthusiasts outside the door. Back then, there weren't hordes of photographers and people waiting to get a glimpse of the show attendees, so it was quite easy to get into a fashion show. A few minutes after the show had started, someone from [PR firm] KCD let me and the other people waiting inside the show venue. Before stepping in, I had no idea who Christophe Decarnin was, or that Balmain was a buzzworthy brand in Paris, but the moment I set foot in the salon and started hearing the Cure soundtrack and saw Raquel, Daria and Carmen, I knew this was a sensation that I had never experienced before. This was what it felt like to be at a major show in Paris. After watching all the editors and models exit, I went out into the rain and walked around the corner onto a quiet Rue du Mont-Thabor and started dancing in the rain. I knew immediately from that moment on that I was meant to work in fashion.

Paris Fashion Week feels more and more like a spectacle, like a red-carpet premiere or concert. Now that fashion has been embraced as part of mainstream pop culture, we're living in an era of fashion as entertainment. There used to be a veil of mystery over the fashion world, where it felt like a sacred laboratory of ideas, but now it feels like everything is calculated to go viral. This is the result of the democratization of fashion and how luxury is accessible anywhere to anyone. I don't think fashion should be for an exclusive members-only club, but when designers feel overwhelmed by the idea of designing a collection and producing a fashion show, a sense of joy is lost and that can instantly be felt. Those memorable moments that stand out in our minds are few and far between, now more than ever.

A.P.C. presentation in the company's old offices on Rue Cassette, Paris, 1993.

Jean Touitou
Founder, A.P.C.

The Kenzo Spring/Summer 1977 show. There wasn't a Paris Fashion Week as such, there were just a few brands showing on a runway. I was working at Kenzo at the time and had some influence on the soundtrack for that show. I remember we played 'Egyptian Reggae' by The Modern Lovers. I remember being just behind Mick J; I remember he was dancing to that music.

There is a lot of unease in me about Paris Fashion Week, because the fashion press doesn't exist any more. We produce a show – when we decide to do one – in order to create some sort of installation representing where we are at in terms of proportions and general feeling. We do that equally to seduce ourselves and to show what our work is about to the representatives of our industry.

'A picture I took while on my way to La Garde Républicaine, the location for the Hermès Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 womenswear show.'

Nadège Vanhee-Cybulski
Artistic director womenswear, Hermès

My first Paris Fashion Week show was And Re Walker, a Spring/Summer collection, and what I loved about the show was the pulse, the dynamism, the radical and modern vision, and this sense of coolness. I was just finishing my studies at Antwerp at the time and I really knew I was in the right place.

For me, Paris Fashion Week marks both a closure and a fantastic celebration of creativity, fashion and glamour. It's about where talents come to meet and exchange. A strong sense of connection happens here because it's a moment where fashion is live – and that's really exhilarating.

Dries Van Noten Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 womenswear show.

Dries Van Noten
Designer

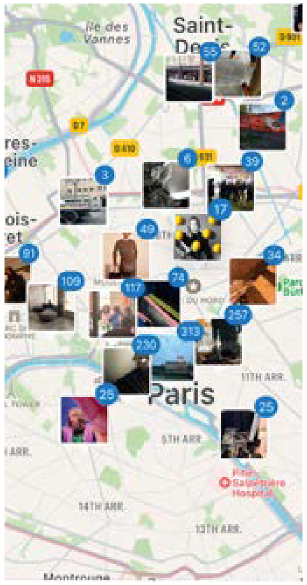
My very first Paris Fashion Week was somewhere in the seventies. I was with Linda Loppa, who had her store in Antwerp at the time, and I was still at the Royal Academy. I attended one of the first shows of Mugler and Montana. As a fashion student, I was literally flabbergasted by what was presented in those shows. What they put out there was like a dream, a fantasy. No commercial obligations, just total artistic freedom. I remember Pat Cleveland coming down the runway. It was a true revelation for me.

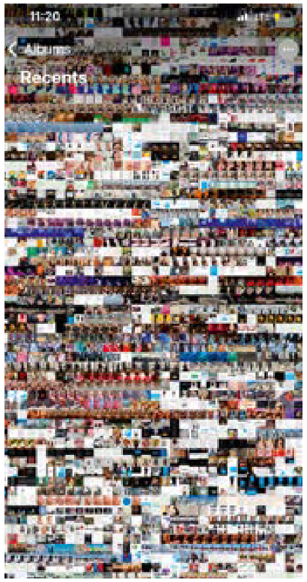
Paris Fashion Week has always been the most international event on the fashion scene and somehow the most democratic. Press and buyers from all over the world visit the most established brands, but also attend smaller presentations of young designers. Everyone gets a chance in Paris.

Luis Venegas
Editor and creative director

The first fashion show I ever attended in Paris was the Thierry Mugler Spring/Summer 1997 haute couture, that very famous show inspired by insects. I was a *stagière* chez Mugler then, so I was so lucky to live the making of that show and enjoy the whole backstage experience. As a teenager, the whole thing felt very Robert Altman's *Prêt-à-Porter*. We spent some three or four sleepless nights working before the show. The night before the whole atelier was filled with enormous bouquets of white roses to encourage us to keep up the good work. It felt very sweet and beyond classy.

Today, Paris Fashion Weeks represent the same thing they have always represented: a unique opportunity for fashion houses, brands, and designers to put their work on display for the whole world to see, especially buyers and the press. This almost religious pilgrimage remains alive due to its mix of – if you're lucky – dreamy experiences and – above all, if you're lucky, too – good business. It's also the best advertising campaign for Paris, happening some six times a year, counting womenswear, menswear and couture fashion weeks. It's said often that shows are so much clickbait these days – well, of course! Making the biggest impact in the media, creating a *coup d'effet* on the runway, and inviting the biggest superstars has always been part of the fashion weeks. They're called *shows* after all!





Ferdinando Verderi
Creative director

The very first Paris Fashion Week show I attended was a Chanel couture show by Karl Lagerfeld. It was more than a decade ago, and almost a decade before my second Paris fashion week show. I remember the date because it happened to be my birthday, 25 January. It was a very contained show, in an elegantly simple setting. I vividly remember the opening music; I still recall its melody. I understood immediately why the anachronistic practice of fashion shows retained such a magnetic pull on an entire industry. It's about that intangible tension; there's no point in trying to describe it. Since that day, I have refrained from judging a show without having been present.

It feels like the 'week' has surpassed the industry that generated it, 'fashion' becoming a creature of its own, a mutant form of a giant collective experience that strives to be the industry itself. In times of on-screen socialization, a rare, shared moment on this scale becomes an experiment in its own right, a laboratory of 'in real life' interactions, a microcosm that thrives on its own autarky, busy regenerating desire. Its loud resonance speaks of its growing impact, but the most valuable part of it, I believe, remains the amount of unplanned small human interactions it forces. We all become actors in a collective unscripted week-long scene broadcast through millions of small cameras.

Brandon Wen
Creative director for fashion, Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp

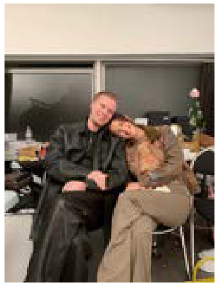
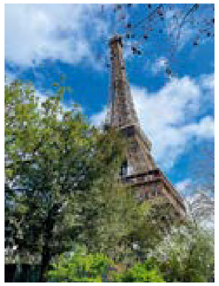
My very first Paris Fashion Week show was Walter Van Beirendonck Spring/Summer 2013. Very fitting for me. It was the middle of summer. I remember arriving: everything was way too hot, everyone sweaty, desperately fanning themselves. I felt so alive. When the music started, I was so overwhelmed: here I was, seeing a real show from a *real* designer. Obviously, I cried. The music was so loud you could physically feel it; the clothing was so beautiful I couldn't control myself. It was a fantastical collection from Walter. For me, it was a sort of 'I'm here, I have to do this' moment.

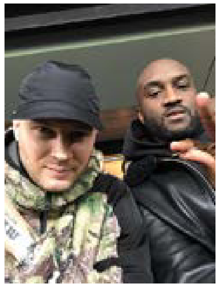
I love Paris Fashion Week. I know people have things to say about it or often criticize the excess, but it is one of my favourite moment(s) of the year. I love the circus; I love that we celebrate beauty in such a grandiose and absurd way. I believe it is what sets fashion apart. Fashion should always be about a dynamic creative feeling. Sometimes I don't know if that's what we are celebrating any more; sometimes we make a big fuss about mediocre design. Don't get me wrong – I love a fuss – but I'd rather make a fuss about good design and cater to high creative taste.

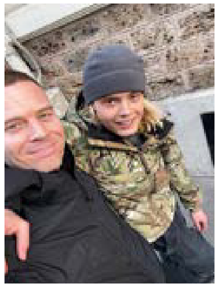
Kiki Willems
Model

It wasn't in Paris, but the first show I ever watched was a Raf Simons show in New York, the Spring/Summer 2018 *Blade Runner* collection. I was working with Raf at Calvin at the time, and he invited me to come and watch the show. It was the first time I had been on the other side, so I was really early, even though I should've known better, because shows never start on time; I think I showed up an hour early. Luckily, it was a standing show, so I could just stand with people I knew. I just remember being really proud of Raf and also of my friends who were walking in the show – it was really cool.

Paris Fashion Week represents to me not only the amazing craftsmanship of the houses and the incredible ateliers that you get to work with, but it also represents friendship. After walking shows for almost ten years you work with the same teams: you're in, you're out, you see the same faces. It's really their kindness and familiarity that gets you through the craziness of it all. I've really made some lifelong friendships that are very special to me.





Matthew M. Williams

Creative director, Givenchy, and co-founder, 1017 ALYX 9SM

The first show that I saw in Paris was one of Kim Jones's for Louis Vuitton menswear that focused on mountaineering. It was just incredible; he had all of these beautiful, oversized puffer jackets, and carabiners that were covered in leather. It was just a beautiful show and really stuck with me. Kim was so generous to have me there. I really loved all of his Vuitton collections; they were so elegant and so powerful.

Paris Fashion Week is a time for our industry to come together and celebrate creativity and designers from around the world. I really appreciate how Paris is such an international fashion week and has always welcomed designers from all countries, not just France. You have huge *maisons* alongside up-and-coming designers. I remember first showing ALYX in Paris, and just being able to have my work seen on the same playing field as many of the designers I grew up aspiring to be like is very special.

Haley Wollens

Stylist

Not the first show, but everything that came before dissipates in the shine of that night: Saint Laurent, Spring/Summer 2018. I was the guest of Chloë Sevigny (of course). The show was jellyfish blouses atop tentacle legs. The crowd was a school of fish in rhinestone boots. Juergen was shooting the campaign on his iPhone, which made so much sense. The after-after was in Lenny Kravitz's dungeon. He showed us his Prince memorabilia. Chloë, Kate, Naomi, and I were the last guests standing. Naomi deejayed Van Morrison from a laptop. I smoked a spliff with Lenny's staff. Chloë and I watched the sunrise behind the Eiffel Tower from our cab.

There is a legitimacy about showing in Paris. It's the Mecca of fashion weeks. Paris Fashion Week represents everything glorious and terrible about this industry. I like that the smaller designers are making their way into town. It's nice to offset the glamour with some spunk – it ultimately creates a richer experience for all.

Aleksandra Woroniecka
Stylist

The first show I went to was probably a Helmut Lang show where I stood at the back. I was lucky to be let in as it was definitely the place to be. I loved everything Helmut Lang was doing at the time. All the top models were in the show, with hardly any make-up or hair styling, walking in the most normal way. The clothes were so precise and had the perfect balance between almost boring and genius.

Paris Fashion Week today still represents the place where fashion makes you dream, where creativity meets classic beauty and know-how. The place where you have the ateliers, a mix of creativity and skills. It's also where the business is: fashion history, ateliers, creativity, and money.

Backstage at Yohji Yamamoto Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 womenswear.

Yohji Yamamoto
Designer

I couldn't tell you the first show I attended but I can tell you about one of the last: the first couture collection of Azzedine Alaïa in January 2003. I admired his pride and his freedom; he always tried to preserve the pleasure in his creations.

Today I think Paris Fashion Week should speak more about the craftsmanship and know-how of the fashion industry. Many factories are closing their doors every year in Japan. Thread-making, fabric-making, and sewing companies that have developed high-level techniques through the years are all disappearing. When people talk about the fashion industry they never mention those who make the industry, these good factories in Italy, in Japan, et cetera. They are living treasures that are becoming very rare these days; I'm afraid we are losing know-how and craftsmanship in the fashion industry.

14 writers, editors, commentators, and creatives in conversation.

What do you think about the past decade in fashion? Or rather, *how* do you go about thinking about the past decade in fashion? To offer some perspective on the period since *System* launched, in the spring of 2013, we paired up a selection of writers, editors, commentators and creatives. People whose experience of change could perhaps combine the micro and the macro.

Tim Blanks & Cathy Horyn
Loïc Prigent & Eugénie Trochu
Tyler Mitchell & Ferdinando Verderi
Samira Nasr & Hanya Yanagihara
Imran Amed & Luca Solca
Susanna Lau & Bryan Yambao
Angelo Flaccavento & Alexander Fury

Some began attending Paris Fashion Week back in the 1980s, others only in the past five years. But their respective pathways towards fashion's upper echelons have more or less coincided with the introduction into the industry of smartphones, social media, selfies, megabrands, clickbait, Kim and Kanye, cancel culture, cruise shows, greenwashing, going viral, sportswear, streetwear, TikTok, K-pop, podcasts, AI, and the metaverse. Not forgetting the announcement, this spring, that LVMH boss Bernard Arnault is now the wealthiest individual in the world.

There was much to discuss.

So we encouraged free-flowing conversation, starting with the topic of Paris Fashion Week, but inevitably twisting and turning towards broader threads of discussion about the industry's evolution. Generous with their time – for which we'd like to thank them – the participants spoke with *System* in the days, weeks and months following the presentation of the Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 season at Paris Fashion Week.

Tim Blanks & Cathy Horyn

Interview by Jonathan Wingfield

‘The whole idea of fashion’s initial impulses has gotten bigger – the illusion got bigger, the aspiration got bigger. Now, the aspiration isn’t simply to have the little dress or the little designer bag, it’s to have the private jet to walk onto holding that bag or wearing that dress.’

In January of this year, the much-loved and respected writer and fashion critic Tim Blanks posted a picture on Instagram of the facade of Parisian restaurant Le Castiglione. It was accompanied by a lengthy caption, extracts of which read as follows:

'Dear Casti, for three decades, you have been my canteen during countless fashion weeks. Breakfast, lunch, late night and every hour in between, you have fed and watered me and just about everyone I know. You were always the best place to eat on my own (table for one, in the window). And now you have to go because your whole corner is being developed as a Gucci superstore. Just like the Vuitton one over the road. Developers! Meh! What do they know about tarte fine aux pommes (I must have eaten hundreds of those) … I want to thank you, dear Casti, for being my home, my haven, my red velvet womb in the fashion week whirlwind. Mournfully but gratefully yours, Tim. (RIP @lecastiglione, 235 Rue Saint-Honoré, 75001 Paris.)'

The post triggered an immediate and affecting response. Almost 500 people commented, many of them industry folks, young and old alike, local and international. The news, and its broader sentiment, had clearly struck a chord. Not so much, one suspects, over the closure of the restaurant itself or even about it being supplanted by a luxury-brand megastore, but how hugely symbolic the development seemed to be of an industry that, over the past decade, has swollen, accelerated, shifted its sights, and in many cases, grown far bigger than even the most seasoned business forecasters could have imagined.

These changes have been centred largely upon the unrelenting dominance of Paris's luxury fashion houses and conglomerates. And, of course, it would be disingenuous and short-sighted not to acknowledge the many benefits associated with all the profits and expansion. The luxury fashion industry now makes a significant contribution to France's GDP, and employs over a million people across the country, enabling artisanal skills to survive and small businesses to be secured for the foreseeable future. And, during fashion's seasonal fanfare, Paris Fashion Week, the vibrations of a cash-rich industry can be felt across the city, in booked-out restaurant and hotels, as well as the stifling traffic jams caused by the fleets of luxury vehicles at the disposal of the assembled attendees.

For *System*, Blanks' words both resonated and exhumed the memory of a comment that his fellow writer and esteemed critic Cathy Horyn had once mentioned to us in passing. 'Towards the end of each fashion week, since forever, Timmy and I will sit in the Castiglione, over dinner, maybe a drink, too, and discuss it all. *Everything*.' As a publication that aims to capture the dialogues at the heart of the industry, the prospect of eavesdropping such a conversation has long-remained tantalizing. Not least because Blanks and Horyn's commentary (him for the Business of Fashion, her for The Cut) represents a level of experience and authority that's always been essential to fashion's evaluation and progress – even if it can sometimes feel a little undervalued or simply eclipsed by other forms of expression, other 'content', other industry needs.

With *System*'s ten-year anniversary providing the chance to re-evaluate fashion's recent history, we were keen to bring Blanks and Horyn together in conversation. If not in the Castiglione, then during a series of Zoom and phone calls, and in-person exchanges, following the conclusion of the Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 season. To cast their all-seeing eye over the 'big picture'. Of Paris. Of Paris Fashion Week. Of the impacts the industry at large is having on design and designers. Of what it means to run a multi-billion-euro fashion business. As well as the broader effects that fashion is having on the global climate crisis, social inequality, and the future of, well, everything. But just before things took an existential turn, there was just time to reappraise Le Castiglione's lunch menu…

> **'Of all the fashion capitals, Paris has been the best at its self-mythology. Probably because they chopped their king and queen's heads off.'**

London and New York,
14 March, 19 April, 25 April 2023

Cathy Horyn: I started going in the early nineties, when I was at the *Washington Post*. You'd go in there and there'd be guys like Burt Tansky from Neiman Marcus and Mel Jacobs of Saks – all those American retail CEOs – having breakfast with their wives. They probably stayed at the Ritz or the Meurice, and went to the Castiglione because the food was good, not pricey, and the owner, Pierre, was so hospitable. You'd never see them in there later in the day.

Tim Blanks: All the Castiglione waiters were such roués, like that guy, Augustin. Breakfast was business-y, but at night the vibe changed and you felt like something might happen later.

Cathy: Lunchtime was only neighbourhood Parisians. I remember [Pierre's son] Fabrice introducing me to a guy who worked for the Crazy Horse. The bar would be packed; the tables would be packed. I never went upstairs, that wasn't my thing, except with you.

Tim: I *only* ever went upstairs, except for that little table for one, downstairs at the front, which was perfect for having half a dozen Gillardeau oysters, the *saumon à l'unilatérale*, and *baba au rhum* for dessert. Always.

Who'd have thought Tim's lunch habits were so emblematic of Paris Fashion Week?

Tim: [Laughs] An army marches on its stomach, so for me, Paris Fashion Week can be charted in the places where you eat. It's social history! Think about Kinugawa on Rue du Mont-Thabor; it was such a great fashion pit stop; you'd go all the time, even on your own and sit at that little sushi bar at the back. Then all of a sudden it got all zhuzhed up, and became all, 'Do you have a reservation, sir?' You couldn't just show up any more. It was little things like that that made you realize how the city was changing.

What do you think triggered those changes?

Tim: The Costes explosion in the mid-nineties certainly had a big impact, I think.[1] Which perhaps made Paris become more international in a way. It seems almost paradoxical to describe it like that, but I guess it was the Costes-ization of Paris. The menu at the Castiglione started looking like a Costes menu – everyone eating those little spring rolls that you wrap in lettuce – there was even a rumour that the Costes had bought the Castiglione.

Cathy: The whole explosion of the Castiglione as a fashion canteen coincided with the development of Rue Saint-Honoré as a retail strip of trendy big brands. Before that it was more charming, with those vintage jewellery shops, and Goyard was there…

Tim: …and Chantal Thomass…

Cathy: …and a lot of those mom-and-pop shops. There are still a few left. [Legendary lingerie house] Cadolle still has its headquarters on Rue Saint-Honoré. I remember writing about Le Castiglione for a *New York Times* travel piece in the early 2000s; about how Rue Saint-Honoré had become a fashion destination, and was drawing an international crowd, certainly since the opening of Colette [in 1997].

Tim: It felt like an adoption of that [Ian] Schrager 'boutique hotel' culture, of Morgans and the Royalton. It was the boutique-ing of Paris, which is a bit weird because Paris *always* had 'boutiques', but maybe it was just generic boutique-ing, the Costes-ization of all those restaurants they opened.

Interestingly, at the same time in the late nineties, you had Keith McNally's restaurants opening in New York, like Pastis, which had a faux-distressed century-old Parisian tobacco smoke effect on its ceiling. These days, when you go to somewhere like the Café Charlot in the Marais, it feels like they've taken their cues more from Pastis. It's old-French-café style, pastiched in New York, and then transposed back to Paris as a pastiche of the pastiche of its own heritage. It's hospitality gone post-post-modern bonkers. And you could say there is a bit of that going on in fashion today, with international brands like The Row or Victoria Beckham, drawn to physically showing in Paris, tapping into those codes of Parisian fashion, and then selling back a slightly watered-down version to an international clientele. We'll probably see a Parisian brand emerging soon that replicates the style of The Row, as opposed to replicating the original source of, say, Hermès, which is on its doorstep.

Tim: Yes, it's kind of like how the Beatles took R&B and sold it back to America. It's the way pop culture works, although Paris has historically been so much more resistant; the Parisians are so much more intractable in their self-belief than other people in big cities. I mean, they definitely embraced jazz culture from America, but Paris fashion always seemed a bit closed, compared to London and New York. Maybe a bit square, until its defences were broken down by Galliano, McQueen, Tom Ford, Michael Kors, Narciso Rodriguez and Marc Jacobs heading up the big luxury houses. And so, for those people, Paris becomes this stamp of legitimacy on a fashion business. It probably always will be for a designer. Even as fashion becomes much more international – with places like Nairobi and São Paulo becoming hubs – to show in Paris is the apex. And I think that's become consolidated over the last few decades. It didn't just happen overnight. It was an orchestrated situation, I would imagine, by the Chambre Syndicale.[2]

> **'Maria Grazia Chiuri did a scarf with all the Paris touristy landmarks printed on it, and included the mammoth Dior boutique, like a tourist destination.'**

It's a bit like Hollywood. People are increasingly aware of fantastic Iranian cinema, Korean cinema, and obviously European cinema, but Hollywood just has its own cachet, because it's mythologized its own existence since day one.

Tim: I actually think fashion has consolidated everything else in the city. You come here for the fashion, but you now get a full cultural 360, which has coincided with the growth of LVMH and Kering as symbols of the big-ness of Paris, the centrality of it. Something like contemporary art in Paris is increasingly defined by Arnault's Fondation Vuitton or the Pinault Collection at the Bourse de Commerce.

So Paris has become a commodity of fashion.

Tim: Maria Grazia did a scarf with an old print of Paris, which had all the touristy landmarks on it, and the mammoth Dior boutique was printed on the scarf as well, like a tourist destination.

The self-mythologizing of, 'We'll just pop ourselves between the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre.'

Tim: Self-mythologizing, that's what it is. Paris seems to be the best at it, probably because they chopped their king and queen's heads off. I don't know for sure how the Macron situation over the past few weeks has affected the mood, but the city feels newly confident; certainly in fashion, there is an unshakable sense that Paris is the centre of the universe. You see Paris as a fashion theme park more than you do in other cities: you have the huge Vuitton stores; you have places like the Place Vendôme, which are like natural amphitheatres for fashion. You have the renovation of the Ritz, even the Langosteria restaurant in the Cheval Blanc[3] is about the elevation of fashion, of creating a Parisian outpost of the most fashionable restaurant in Milan but making it better than the original. It's almost like a 'fuck you'.

Cathy: What we are seeing is the power of LVMH and Kering, as well as the power of branding. And concurrently to that, you see the decline of cafes in Paris. These days I'm more attracted to Le Petit Vendôme again because it reminds me of old Paris; it's like a friendly dive café; it has a great cheese platter, and it represents that simpler Parisian lifestyle.[4]

Doesn't that kind of sentimental nostalgia go against fashion's natural state of progress? Aren't those just the inevitable changes that define cities?

Cathy: I was talking to Jonathan Anderson and [stylist] Benjamin Bruno about this last summer because Loewe had just moved from the Left Bank – Place Saint-Sulpice, which was always associated with Saint Laurent, and with Catherine Deneuve who lives there – to Rue Scribe, between the Opéra and the Madeleine. Benjamin was saying it's such an uncool neighbourhood, and I was like, 'But you're in the heart of 19th-century Paris; this is where it all happened. [Charles] Worth was round the corner.' I find it really reassuring that in Paris, like in New York City, the city just constantly changes, and if you love history and the evolution of things, you can embrace most of these changes and understand them as part of a bigger picture.

What about the scale of the industry, and this idea that there's more of *everything* now, especially in Paris. Are there more shows on the schedule now, or is that a popular misconception?

Tim: If you look at a calendar from 1990 – I recently found all my old schedules for *Fashion File*[5] – and the amount of stuff we did in one day! The number of interviews we did, skating around with a camera crew…

Cathy: I think you're right, Tim. I've always said what I really like about Paris, over the other cities, is that they know who they are. The Chambre Syndicale has been in existence for 150 years and they run that schedule really well. If you look back to the early nineties, the schedule was just as crowded; we probably went to *more* shows at the time. And I do think we went to better shows then, too. We saw not only the established houses like Chanel, Saint Laurent or Dior, but we also saw Mugler, Gaultier, Helmut Lang, Margiela. You had a feast.

Tim: Martine Sitbon…

Cathy: There were so many, and they were all great. That whole pattern continued through the eighties, well into the nineties, and the early 2000s. You were getting a lot of value for your time when you came to the Paris shows. Although I'd probably say you got the same value in New York at that time.

Tim Blanks: I don't know if that was down to more quality control or if they were just better designers, or if the Chambre Syndicale's entry criteria for fashion week were more stringent.

'Is all this brand power built on old Parisian heritage names actually to the detriment of fashion – because it doesn't feed enough innovation?'

Cathy, you just said you felt the shows were better 20-30 years ago. So, what is your memory of the week that's just taken place. Did you feel let down? Has there been a lapse in quality control?

Cathy: The fundamental shift is down to branding and marketing. Fashion's no longer really about design as much, and yet I think that is what we're all hungering for. I don't mean fantasy, I just mean more really good design that moves the needle. I think some of us still believe that it can exist, if you look at Jonathan Anderson at Loewe or Demna at Balenciaga, and probably a few others. I think what we're seeing now is more about these big brands expressing their power and domination. Chanel's a $17-billion brand today, Dior is multiple billions, and they have these huge shows. Look at Dior in the Tuileries; it seems to have gotten bigger and bigger and it's got all these K-pop stars. It's just about something else today; it is not really about innovation. Or it just serves so many other purposes today, whether that's social media or the influencers, all kinds of other things.

Will that shift continue?

Cathy: Well, I think what *System* is capturing with this ten-year issue is that fashion is in some sort of whirlpool right now. You can either go this way or that way, but it is just spinning right now, and it could head in any direction. With Demna or Jonathan Anderson or a few other people, we're seeing the type of values in fashion that we still associate with, say, Prada or Raf [Simons], but, you know, we also have Pharrell coming into Vuitton menswear, and so we'll probably see more things like that.

There have been mixed reactions to that appointment, even though it's too early to actually judge anything.

Cathy: Vuitton is such a different beast to everyone else, Vuitton men's in particular. They communicate across such a huge global platform, and it is not just about the clothes. As long as you have a great leader in there, a great creative force who could come from someplace else, like Pharrell. It is very gutsy to choose him. I think the biggest question is how much time he will commit to being the creative director, because he does so many other things. I am open to the idea that someone like him could come in with a bigger vision of how people want to look. But that is different to what Raf or Nicolas [Ghesquière] are about. Whenever you talk to them – and you could probably include John [Galliano] and Lagerfeld, too, in that tiny core of designers on the inside – you sense these are people who really understand what design is about, and how the historical needle of fashion gets changed by someone, and what really constitutes an original design. Something more than just, 'Oh, that is a great arrangement of buttons or zippers'; something like a silhouette change or something that represents a fresh expression, and that is what those guys had grown up with and lived with. When you look at Balenciaga under Nicolas in those early seasons, he really did create trends. I think Demna has done the same thing at Balenciaga in the last few years, so for sure that happens. Just not very often. Lagerfeld used to say, 'You only need three great designers in a decade to make the change.'

'Paris fashion always seemed a bit closed, a bit square, until its defences were broken down by Galliano and McQueen heading up the big houses.'

In his note at the Balenciaga show, Demna wrote, 'Fashion has become a kind of entertainment, but often that part overshadows the essence of it, which lays in shapes and volumes.' He had his reasons for saying that, and the context was specific, but he is basically saying what you are alluding to.

Tim: Yes, although I'd say fashion has been a branch of the entertainment industry since the time of the supermodels. That was when fashion started mirroring Hollywood: you had producers, directors, cameramen, and stars. But then, if we're going with the analogy of the Hollywood studio system, then that will eventually collapse, as it always does. The hegemony will collapse.

Cathy: It is weird because you also have all these massive brands in both Milan and in Paris, and to a degree with Burberry in London, then you have small designers, but that group is shrinking because it is hard to be a small independent designer now. But I agree with Tim, I think the supermodels were integral to that move towards fashion as entertainment – was that 1990?

Tim: The Peter Lindbergh cover was 1990,[6] it was fairly epochal in terms of timing.

Cathy: You got the Alaïa shows and the Versace shows; it was all so riveting to people. But I think if you start looking at the development of Twitter, which launched in 2006, and Instagram in 2010, that is the significant change. Obviously, prior to that you had Tom Ford and Domenico De Sole really cranking up the Gucci Group, acquiring Balenciaga, McQueen and Saint Laurent,[7] while Arnault was doing the same thing with LVMH. It was that whole brand consolidation: putting big money in, getting great talent, like putting Galliano into Dior. Then you have the social-media phenomenon and e-commerce. I remember talking to Tom Ford in 2004, when he had left Gucci, and we were talking about e-commerce for Tom Ford International, and they just weren't even aware of it yet. It was still such new territory. So many brands, like Chanel and Céline, didn't want anything to do with e-commerce, as it was seen as down market. So social media and the digital world have just changed everything.

Tim: And the globalization of everything – that you can speak to everywhere with one voice. I do go back to the Hollywood studio-system analogy: they contracted all the best directors and the best stars who were exclusive to one studio; they had global reach, those movies played all over the world. It was when Hollywood was the world's dream factory. I think we are still in an early phase of development with this, twenty years or whatever it has been. And if the world survives the more critical challenges facing it – like climate change, rather than fashion industry challenges – you might see a reaction, you might see the Marxist dialectic, and the independent voices might re-emerge as a force.

'The fundamental shift is down to branding. Fashion's no longer really about design as much, and yet I think that is what we're all hungering for.'

Independent of the big houses?

Tim: Yes, there was an interesting thing happening in China, before the pandemic chaos and confusion, where I understood that fashion-forward consumers in China were seeking out the most arcane Western designers to validate their own taste. So, it was little designers who became coveted, and this was especially being talked about in London when people like Jonathan Saunders and Christopher Kane were starting out. There was a real hunger for the fashion unknown. It's probably completely reverted back again, but they didn't seem so caught up in the names that everybody knew.

Cathy: There has been that urge in the last 10 to 15 years to find more independent brands. I mean, there is a wistfulness, or a nostalgia; you see it on Instagram accounts that show late eighties and nineties fashion, the kind that Tim and I remember, things like BodyMap, Vivienne...

Tim: …Katherine Hamnett. She was amazing!

Cathy: There is certainly that nostalgia around, but the reality of a designer today, producing the clothes, getting a slot in a factory, and maintaining a studio somewhere… I mean, you can do it for a decade but then you're just worn out. And the thing the big companies have is infrastructure and real estate, and they just dominate. I was at the London shows, and I really like this guy from Wales called Paolo Carzana. I was just thinking about him because he's such a one-off; his set-up is so small, but he is making clothes dyed with vegetables and spice. I love the whole intention of what he is doing, and the fact he doesn't compromise, but we've seen lots of designers out of London with the same good intentions, and we've seen how tough it is to carve out a future.

What's the best-case scenario for someone like him? Could you ever envisage a new Rick Owens-type designer emerging, someone who could grow their business as successfully as he has?

Cathy: Well, you know, Rick has talked about this in the past, and so did McQueen. When you think about what McQueen was in the nineties, it wasn't a brand yet – he was a designer, and he was barely selling anything, so it was about creating the myth of McQueen.

Tim: He didn't produce anything for three seasons.

Cathy: He didn't care; he just wanted to create the things he did. When you think of Rick Owens, and all those years in LA when he was doing those weedy, goth-looking clothes and just being connected to a few stylists. But he too had the time to create the myth of Rick; he also had the support of all those retailers and journalists who loved what he was doing. If you look at the early Rick Owens collections in Paris, they were pretty awful. His basic wearable things were great, but when he was trying to be experimental, it was so cringey, yet over time, he got it together, and he is incredible now. As Rick has said himself, if it wasn't for the time that he was given – by his partner, by the stores, by the press – he wouldn't be in business today.

Tim: Do you think the McQueen model of not producing anything for several seasons, and just building a sort of mystique, would still be possible for someone to do now?

Cathy: I don't think it is *impossible*. I still believe that if you are talented, if you have the ideas of a Margiela, and in the case of McQueen, you have the incredible Savile Row skills, and you combine that with the vision that he had of women, you have something super powerful. I still think if someone has a great idea, they can do that.

Tim: For me, there are two people from London in the last ten years – Craig [Green] and Jonathan [Anderson], one menswear, one womenswear. It's funny because Jonathan started as a menswear designer, and after his first collection Sarah [Mower] and I went backstage and told him, 'You should be doing womenswear!' Craig is an interesting case, as in someone who hasn't compromised and who has earned an enormous amount of respect and adulation, and has a following, but you just can't see how that scales, even now. I mean, what does scaling even mean today? You know, if the fashion industry is preoccupied with issues like sustainability, there is something so fundamentally unsustainable about the idea of fashion. Yet I still sit with people who excitedly tell me, 'We're going to be the next billion-dollar business!' And that feels like a fundamental shift. When I first interviewed Michael Kors, in about 1985, he said, 'If I'm a million-dollar business, I want to be able to put that million dollars on the table, I want to be as big as I say I am.' It was such a different reality to this $20-billion chimera, which becomes kind of meaningless, like a cudgel that you beat people with. The scale of these houses has actually become numbing.

Would you say the principal metric of success has now become the scale of business?

Tim: Yes. It's like that *Austin Powers* '100 billion dollars!' scene.[8] That is now the goal. But a billion dollars? I mean, how big were fashion businesses back then?

Cathy: I remember Tom and Domenico talking about Gucci as a billion-dollar brand, which felt like a big deal at the time. But now it's like, 'Who cares, that's *tiny*!' I mean, Tory Burch is over a billion dollars. It is all these guys – and it is mostly *guys* – who are executives, and it is almost like a fetish for them. Like, 'We're 15 billion now, let's get to 20 billion!'

Tim: I remember a big American *Vogue* story about Alexander McQueen, back when he ruled, and it said, 'This year McQueen will break $2 million in sales…' And Patrick Cox, who at the time was riding his whole Wannabe wave[9], said to me, 'Two million dollars?! I'm doing like X many more millions!' So, even that whole smoke-and-mirrors thing back then seems minuscule by today's standards.

'Lagerfeld used to say, 'You only need three great designers in a decade to make the change.' I'd be happy if we had just one right now.'

Cathy: McQueen didn't even make a profit with the Gucci Group until 2008. That's not to say they weren't building up their business and doing the things that they were supposed to be doing, but the profit didn't come until then. I think the point is, people were preoccupied by creativity, and wonderful and inspiring shows. A billion-dollar business simply wasn't the benchmark. We are all at shows nowadays, some by very big houses, where we despair that the runway is not as creative as it should be; that it doesn't suit the legacy of the house.

You were saying before that someone like McQueen was given the time to finetune his skills, to build his world. Do you think the industry still has the patience to allow that to happen today?

Cathy: If you think about Demna getting started at Balenciaga, it took a while to fall into place. At the very beginning, it felt like a rollover of the ideas of Vetements; he was definitely experimenting with the classic Balenciaga shapes, but Vetements did creep into it, plus a bit of Margiela. What was so interesting to me was when in 2021 – an amazing year for him and for the house – he did his first couture show, which really clarified his ideas and his skills. It was like he'd taken the history of Cristóbal Balenciaga and married it with the shapes that he was proposing, which in a kind of historical line followed on from Margiela, no question in my mind. But, crucially, he had now made Balenciaga his. And that really convinced me, and a lot of other people, that you could bring in a big talent and, with enough time and enough support, they could remake a house in a way that you didn't anticipate.

Tim: Demna had lots of experience prior to Vetements or Balenciaga

Cathy: Tim's right. He came out of years at Margiela, a number of years at Vuitton. Plus he's from a different part of the world, former Soviet Union, so his is a perspective that fashion hasn't seen before. He also has that additional skill that you really need in fashion today, which is knowing how to be an excellent creative director, because you are running an entire team of people. So, when people like that are given the opportunity and enough time, then they *can* make it happen, which makes me feel very positive about fashion.

Tim: How many people do you think are like that in fashion, but never ever have the spotlight turned on them? How many bands were there in Liverpool who were as experienced as the Beatles? How many Beatles were there when they first started?

Why don't you answer your own question, Tim?

Tim: Well, I look at someone like Lutz Huelle, who kind of comes from a similar background to Demna, and the same sort of cultural crucible that produced Wolfgang Tillmans. That was a scene. I think Lutz is kind of amazing and unsung. He does what he does with extremely limited resources. He is just one person. I am sure Cathy can think of others who are equally worthy of a gig like Balenciaga. Then I look at someone like Dries who has been doing what he does for decades. I thought the collection he just showed was fantastic. Cathy, you look dubious.

Cathy: No, I liked it. I just didn't like the setting; I thought it was hard to see the clothes. Going past you as opposed to coming at you. I thought their scale was off. The collection was great though. Like every designer, Dries has had great seasons and a few that have been less interesting. What is so admirable about him is the longevity of his label, and the fact he really knows his clientele; his prices are still pretty good, too, compared to many other houses, and he has a following that he keeps growing.

Longevity in itself is worthy of praise.

Cathy: This is my thing about Sarah Burton at McQueen, and the advantage of someone who's been at a house for 26 years. It just goes against the whole Dracula routine, with these brands turning over people, finding someone else, getting fresh blood in there. I think that says more about who is managing the company and what they know about running a business.

In the Musée Galliera's *1997* exhibition, there are videos of shows from that year where you see the audience applauding when a particular look is on the catwalk. And now, of course, there's no applause because everyone on the front row is filming and broadcasting what they're seeing to their own digital audiences. Everyone is now an active participant, no one is a simply an observer, because everything is about documenting the spectacle.

Tim: Or everyone is an observer and not a participant.

Cathy: You're not sitting there pondering what you've just seen, because your phone has already digested it and is spitting it out to someone else in your universe. I was at a Marc Jacobs show – Fall 2017, at the Park Avenue Armory – and he asked people to not get their phones out and to just *look* at the clothes. That's happened several times, but, you know, Marc is a very good designer, whereas if we went to some of these shows and they asked us to put our phones away, we'd quickly become a pretty restless audience.

Tim: Exactly the same thing happens at gigs and in clubs. The things that used to be participatory have become spectator sports in a way.

Is there any truth in the idea that designers are designing with Instagram in mind?

Tim: Yes! But I'd say that was already happening in a similar way when fashion made the leap to cable TV, and designers started making collections that would look good on television. I had producers who were like, [adopts dismissive tone] '*Helmut Lang*? No, let's do Betsey Johnson because she does a cartwheel at the end!' It was all very lights, camera, *action*. They didn't want the measured, minimal way that Helmut Lang's models were walking down the catwalk. They wanted Westwood, Betsey Johnson, and so shows started doing more of that.

Cathy: They were doing that in the seventies, too.

Tim: Yes, Kenzo, Montana, and Mugler.

Cathy: Kennedy Fraser wrote about that in the *New Yorker* in the late seventies – how models were suddenly hamming it up on the runway, pretending to flirt or dance. It was all part of a shift to shows as performance, with models encouraged to express their personalities. It made Fraser feel, as she put it, like 'an indulgent nanny on the sidelines of a creative playground'. I do think if you look at a lot of collections, like the last few seasons at Saint Laurent, they are very good at packaging it for a digital audience. I thought last season was just boring and repetitive, with all these long, skinny hooded dresses, but this latest collection [Autumn/Winter 2023-2024] had more variety with the tailoring and the leather jackets, and I liked the way it was staged to evoke the feeling in the old InterContinental Hotel ballroom.[10]

Tim: And the catwalk was the same height.

Cathy: And the carpeting was the same as the YSL couture house. But when you look at the collection, he [Anthony Vaccarello] puts a very simplified look on the runway. It's three ideas: the suit, the leather jacket, and the drapey simplified evening thing. Maria Grazia [Chiuri] at Dior has also been quite simplified in her approach. There are many reasons for that, but I think one of them is about presenting it for a mass digital audience.

> **'McQueen was like this weird genius autodidact, almost like Mozart. You don't even have to like the clothing to still be inspired by the attitude.'**

Tim: Watching those Saint Laurent and Dior shows, what I thought was interesting now is that while fashion has always fetishized a time – like, this is the Y2K season, or this is the nineties season, or this is the swinging sixties – it now feels like it is fetishizing a *place*. When we walked in and I saw the ballroom chandeliers, I thought it was the whole notion of 'things you missed', which has always been such a strong element with Marc Jacobs or with Kim Jones, and some of the things that Raf has done, too. It is really about evoking the mood of a moment that you missed, and now you have the resources to recreate it. Fashion has become an amazing way to relive things or to experience things that took place before you were even born.

The self-referential nature of the Saint Laurent set reminded me of that 'lost season' film that Balenciaga made a couple of years ago, the one that you starred in Cathy!

Cathy: The concept was a bit different: in 1996-1997, there was a season's gap at Balenciaga, between Josephus Thimister[11] leaving the house and Ghesquière arriving. There was this one season when there wasn't a Balenciaga ready-to-wear collection. So, Demna had the idea of creating a collection for that season that never happened.

Tim: It was just a video?

Cathy: Yes, Harmony Korine directed the runway film that they staged to make it feel like it was the nineties. They dressed Diane Pernet[12] and I in nineties clothes and put us in the front row; everyone was furiously smoking backstage in hair and make-up. It was very evocative of the time. When Diane and I went backstage to congratulate Demna, we had to do it in the context of 1997, we had to stay in character so to speak. It was a lot of fun. You had all the regular Balenciaga models, like Eliza [Douglas], but the audience was made up mostly of fashion students dressed nineties style.

I remember watching the video but, tellingly, I cannot remember the collection itself. We see this increasingly, like with the Kim Jones show in front of the pyramids of Giza.[13] These incredible shows which, because of the increasing need to present fashion as a visual anecdote, or as entertainment, sometimes end up eclipsing the clothes themselves.

Tim: It is a time and a place, rather than a collection. I've got a question – who do you think has been the most influential designer of the *System* years? I mean, I think it's Alexander McQueen.

Cathy: He's been dead for over ten years!

Tim: I just mean generally, as a sort of aspirational presence. More and more I find it's all about McQueen. When I do my teaching, he is the one designer – regardless of whether you aspire to the model he established – whose creativity, coherence and commitment inspires people, and to me, that makes him a towering figure. It is funny because I wouldn't have necessarily thought it ten years ago.

Cathy: I agree with you on all fronts, and the reasons are fascinating. I think people are looking at McQueen in contrast to the way the fashion industry is now. And I also think that Sarah and the McQueen brand have had a lot to do with that, keeping alive that continuity.

Tim: The fact that he died seals him in this perfect chamber that can be analysed from every angle. You can make new perspectives on something, but it's like the Wallace Collection – what do you call those museums where you cannot add anything to the collection, so it remains completely intact, beginning, middle and end?[14] Even now, when I talk to [Met curator] Andrew Bolton about McQueen, we still find new things in his work and his life to discuss, and that is why I think he will ultimately be one of the most important fashion designers ever.

Cathy: I completely agree.

Tim: There's this sort of weird genius autodidact about him, almost like Mozart, those people who just ring through the centuries effortlessly, and so he is an inspiration on so many different levels. You don't even have to like the clothing to still be inspired by the attitude.

Cathy: But to answer your original question more directly, I would say that in the last decade, Demna's reinvention of the house at Balenciaga is really interesting, and just as important as

> **'It was all a bit cavalier back then. That notion of paying models with clothing, so after Galliano's shows, those outfits just wandered off into the night.'**

Ghesquière; maybe even closer to the aesthetic principles of Cristóbal Balenciaga. I'm not taking anything away from Ghesquière – they were 15 very exciting years. When you went into that Couvent des Cordeliers,[15] there was a real sense of anticipation. And the amount of stuff that got copied from those collections, whether it was the silhouette or that batwing sweater that he used to do, everyone was obsessed by that; the neoprene, all the shapes and florals. But what Demna has done there is really interesting.

Tim: Although in the eyes of the world, Balenciaga is as known for sweatshirts and trainers.

Cathy: You could say that is pretty smart given how casual the world is everywhere. You can be a luxury business on several levels – you can have couture and made-to-measure pantsuits on one level, and then sweatshirts and trainers on another. It is a delicate balance to pull off, but I think they have been good at it. Because we are talking about this past decade, I would also say Raf, too, certainly what he did at Dior. I think that is becoming clearer to people now than it was at the time. His collaboration with Miuccia Prada is just unprecedented. I can't think of any other creative partnership that is like that, that's proven to be both creatively and financially successful.

Tim: No, there isn't one.

Cathy: I also think Jonathan Anderson gets interesting in the last four seasons because he made a turn in the collections; he took it away from the Ibiza hippie drapey thing they were doing, and he is making it more about high fashion. It's more challenging, difficult, obviously pegging it to surrealism in the first two collections. I think he's used the last two seasons to refine his new approach. The shapes are simpler, the fabric and print development more specific, such as those simple shifts in silk duchess with blurry Richter-inspired prints. It's relatively rare to see a creative director at a successful brand make such a turn. I think Jonathan knew he had to in order to stay inspired. He and Benjamin did say they were getting sick of what Loewe looked like. And I shared their feeling.

Tim: We've not mentioned Gaultier; I feel like he is a bit of an unsung hero.

Cathy: I don't agree, I think he is a very sung hero. He is a little bit like McQueen, like what you were saying, Tim – people will constantly rediscover Gaultier. I think the appreciation level is still enormous.

Tim: But I do think, considering, when you talk about the anticipation of walking into a Ghesquière show, the anticipation you felt going into the Cirque d'Hiver – maybe it was my age, it was 30 years ago – you had this hyped-up hysteria, and the whole palaver of even getting in. That incredible pre-social-media circus. Maybe it wasn't the K-pop frenzy, but it was pretty frenzied.

Cathy: You would go to a Gaultier show, not just with a sense of anticipation, but knowing that you were going to be shocked, horrified, thrilled. I always felt like he was attacking whatever assumptions you had or whatever conventions you came from – and people were outraged.

Tim: There would be big crowds outside Gaultier. I remember the busloads of drag queens who would come from Berlin for Vivienne, Gaultier and Martine Sitbon. I did a story on them, and they had a fabulous ringleader. It was like this clown car of drag queens that would arrive and just spill out into the show. And then inside you've got Madonna pushing a baby down the catwalk in a pram;[16] it's funny to think about those events that were not for mass consumption, there being no social media.

So little documentation.

Tim: You know an extraordinary thing, [Helmut Lang PR] Michèle Montagne called up *Fashion File* asking for help, because Helmut Lang hadn't filmed their shows. They just had no footage.

Cathy: Oh wow, that is amazing.

Tim: It was all slightly cavalier back then. That whole notion of paying models with clothing, so that after Galliano's shows, those outfits just wandered off into the night.

Cathy: The other thing about Helmut is that backstage he wouldn't even talk about the clothes. I kind of miss the days with Margiela when there was no designer, no show notes written in advance. You had to sit on the runway and interpret what you saw – there was no explanation.

Just to return to social media, how do you feel its rise has impacted yourselves as fashion critics?

Cathy: Personally, when Twitter started I was still at the *New York Times* and I found it kind of entertaining to see whether I could summarize a show, or a feeling about a show, in 140 characters. But now I'm off Twitter, and I don't use Instagram for fashion. So, I try to be more and more oblivious to social media. I really felt last season like I am going to go to fewer shows, or go further afield, to try and get off the treadmill of what the shows have become. As a writer over the last three or four decades, I always feel like I try to change my approach a little bit.

'It's all these guys – and it is mostly guys – who are executives, and it is almost like a fetish for them. Like, 'We're 15 billion now, let's get to 20 billion!''

Has what you are looking for in a great fashion show changed?

Cathy: I think with my own maturity and my own understanding of things, I am looking more for things that are truly technically well done, and that are just well thought through. I'm thinking of Jonathan's last Loewe show. I feel like I am more clued into things like that now. But then, when I think of Demna's amazing *Parliament* show [Spring/Summer 2020], which looked like the European Union assembly room, it struck a chord because I'm always looking for designers who can express social or political aspects of their time.

Tim: What in your writing do you think people are responding most to now?

Cathy: I think it goes back to what we said earlier: there is this curiosity for things in the past, so I find I get the most feedback when I have included some historical context, like, 'this was based on the original Saint Laurent staging at the InterContinental'. There is feedback from readers who need more perspective, they like that. They also like that you are willing to say that something is not as good as it has been, like with Chloé. I don't think what Gabriella Hearst does at Chloé is interesting compared to the many stages of its past. I think it is important to say those things and I feel that there is feedback to doing that. I get comments because I have done that.

Tim: I feel that I am a contextualist, more than a critic. I rarely say, 'this is shit' or 'this is fabulous'. But I tend to write more about what I am experiencing in the moment – it could be the hair, the make-up, the music or the backdrop. I love all of that, and I find younger people are much more interested in context than older people. They're much more likely to say – it sounds glib – 'Oh my god, you actually saw a Claude Montana show in person.'

Cathy: I agree. People tend to get so excited about things, and not to be snarky about it, but it's also important to say to them, 'This is how it was done the first time around' or 'This thing you're seeing today actually comes out of this'. I think that contextualizing something is also a way of saying it is not new, so cool your jets a bit.

Tim: Yes, you do see people getting very excited about things that you've maybe seen four or five incarnations of. How many times you have been absolutely blown away by a show? I remember the first show I ever saw in Paris was Saint Laurent at the InterContinental, which was amazing. Also, going to a Geoffrey Beene show in New York, and seeing people crying. I want to cry at a fashion show again. Have you ever?

Cathy: I don't know if I ever cried, but there have been some emotional things. My time covering shows starts in 1986, and I think we've seen so many interesting things in our times. I think of Romeo Gigli's Murano glass collection, just the sound of the glass was like a ridiculous fantasy.[17] Some of the Gaultier shows. I think of Helmut because there was such a sexual undertone in his collections and the way they were presented; the way they were done was so new at the time, and it's hard to put your finger on, which for me is the essence of fashion. It should be strange and mysterious, and you can't figure out why. Raf's *History of My World* at Parc de la Villette.[18] His Dior show with the flowers on the wall [Autumn/Winter 2012]. The Marc Jacobs Karole Armitage collaboration [Autumn/Winter 2020]. That was a moment in time; I think it still is. And I can think of a few Margiela collections. We could go on; there are plenty of those shows.

In the last decade?

Cathy: I would say Demna's first couture collection in July 2021. Absolute silence in the room, people walked away just breathless. As I mentioned before, it was the clarification of everything he'd been trying to do up until that point. It was all summarized in that collection and the way it was presented in that historic space. Tim was talking about the fetishizing of the past, I mean, that was like the perfect example. It wasn't even the original salon, but it was made to look like the original salon.

Tim: For me, and it's not as grand as that, but when Craig Green did the Children's Crusade collection,[19] I don't know what it was called in real life, that's what I call it, and people were just sobbing. That was a real moment for me.

Cathy: I am generally very optimistic about things, but I do think one of

'Demna's amazing *Parliament* show struck a chord because I'm always looking for designers who can express social or political aspects of their time.'

the problems of the last decade is that we don't have enough forward-thinking designers. We don't have enough truly experimental designers. For a lot of these companies, especially those with such a legacy and heritage at stake, the designers tend to use the past as opposed to really thinking about the future. The thing that is concerning me is that, with exceptions, the next thing won't come from designers over 50. It will come from those in their twenties and thirties. That's true, historically. Look at the influence in the 1990s of McQueen, Margiela and Helmut Lang, to mention a few. But the number of designers who are influential today at the same age is not great. That should be a concern.

Tim: You went to Sunnei in Milan, where there were people crowd-surfing, and saw how it struck a chord with that audience. If you think the new wave comes from people in their twenties or their teens, maybe our wave has already crashed on the beach and we are lying there with the starfish and seaweed, and these waves are coming, and we might be oblivious to them.

Cathy: Maybe, maybe. This might be a little naive, but it makes me think of what Rudi Gernreich said in the late sixties, about how the future is going to be something that is made with technology, and the fashion will have to come from that. We have seen 3D-printing and some moulded garments; again, Demna in this last collection, he did that airbag technology [Autumn/Winter 2023-2024]. But it is still going to have to be something not based on the clothing that we have known for the last 100 years, since women in pants is 1920s onwards, so from there.

Tim: We still only have two arms, two legs, a head and a torso, so until we get to a Cronenbergian style of body modification, which *is* here and could easily become more prevalent… As we enter the decadence of this civilization, surely there will be more extremes of this. I haven't seen *Crimes of the Future*,[20] but everything about that sounds so feasible, that sort of grotesque exhibitionism, the fascination with cruelty.

Cathy: One thing that we are seeing that is fascinating and kind of curiously life affirming – we saw a bit of it on the Oscars red carpet, which is pretty ghastly – is seeing girls wearing a lot less. Miu Miu did the underpants this season, although Miuccia had already done that in the nineties, but now we are seeing more girls wearing less out in public – guys, too, but I am focusing more on women and how they are dressing. You see a lot of semi-nudity on the streets of New York, when it is warm, and you're also seeing different aspects of male dress becoming really irrelevant, namely the tie and the collar. You are seeing guys wearing different versions of the tuxedo. So, all that is kind of interesting, and then you think: will it get to the next phase where it's some sort of garment that's made of recycled plastic and you just put it on?

Tim: That's another reason why McQueen is the most influential designer of the last 30 years, his whole thing about transhumanism. He did kind of respond to that idea in his work; he was so ahead of the curve in so many things. I mean, it's slightly beyond me, but it seems to be more and more of a possibility. And you can imagine a fashion response to that will be fairly radical and revolutionary.

Cathy: Transhumanism or some sort of costume… maybe it's a spray-on thing. Jonathan Anderson did those stick-on sweaters for Fall 2023 – not very sustainable, mind you. They will be sold in a big sheet, and you just peel them off a sheet of paper and stick them on and you are ready to go. They look so real, like a knitted sweater. It's a funny idea. But then you think, what are the Diors and the Chanels of the world going to do? Because they're about selling their legacy. It is hard to imagine them doing a moulded suit when they've got to keep selling the perfume and the camellias and all that stuff.

'People think of Olivier Rousteing as an early adoptee of Instagram. But talking to him now, I find that he's a bit burned out by the whole thing.'

If you looked at the three big Parisian fashion houses 20 years ago, you had Galliano at Dior, total maverick; Karl at Chanel, in his own way a maverick persona; and you had Tom Ford at Yves Saint Laurent, who had reinvented the role of the designer as a kind of entrepreneurial-creative-director-sex-symbol. If you look at those same houses now, you have Maria Grazia Chiuri at Dior, Virginie Viard at Chanel, and Anthony Vaccarello at Saint Laurent, all of whom are very successfully serving their respective houses. But could you envisage a true maverick at the helm of one of those big Parisian houses today?

Cathy: I think you could say that Virgil was a maverick, certainly within the world of Vuitton and LVMH. He was really attuned to what was going on in the world at that time, and his skills at communicating were so impressive.

'Virgil talked about Duchamp a lot. I wonder if when we get around to putting him in perspective, whether he'll be regarded as the Duchamp of fashion?'

Tim: Virgil talked about Duchamp a lot, and I wonder if when we get around to putting him in perspective, whether he will be regarded as a Duchamp in fashion? He would make those Duchampian objects, like he reconceptualized art exhibitions and cars and all sorts of different things. The way he kind of elevated and made art out of the banal. Then, when that was levelled to him as a criticism, he would just say, 'So?' His response was always so measured. He was kind of criticism proof.

He was never defensive about the ideas either.

Tim: No, he was never defensive, and he was never overly absorbed by notions of authorship. Everything that he said resonates more than a lot of what he actually did, even though he did so many things in so many different arenas and was so energetic. But if you wanted to pin one thing to him, like you would, say, the Bar Jacket for Dior, or an incredible wedding dress for Balenciaga, or Ziggy Stardust for David Bowie, there is not really one thing that defines Virgil.

It is probably him, Virgil himself.

Tim: Yes.

Cathy: When it comes to mavericks, I think it's really a question of how much risk the CEOs of those big houses are willing to take. I think they *should* take the risk, but are they willing?

Tim: I think it has to happen; it *has* to. Because there is a slight merry-go-round feel just now to what's going on.

With Paris becoming so dominant, what effect is that now having on New York, Milan and London?

Tim: London is still what it always was; the sort of scrappiness of it, the sense of the crucible, of people doing fashion because it's what they want to do. They're not hell-bent on becoming millionaires, which I think eventually is what crushed New York; you got the sense that those young designers were hell-bent on success. In London, success meant something different for young designers because London never had a Calvin or a Ralph or a Donna Karan. London had Norman Hartnell,[21] and with Vivienne Westwood as a figurehead, there was this fabulous eccentricity that made for really exciting creativity. There have been times when New York was exciting, but I think New York always had different priorities to London or Paris. There wasn't the creativity in New York to feed its business in the end, while in London there wasn't the business to feed the creativity. Milan had a sort of balance but then there was always the Italian-ness of Milan; there wasn't the eccentricity or the spice. With Paris, you get the business, the creativity, and the spice.

It's the perfect storm.

Tim: And surprisingly, given the intractability of the French, it's Paris that had a sort of acceptance or a patience, as we said before, where things have been allowed to develop until there's a pay-off, so you get designers from all over the world who've been around in Paris forever and still are, like Dries, Rei, Yohji, Junya or XULY.Bët.

Cathy: I think you're right. I do feel more confident about London coming back because it's had such historical up-and-down periods. So we might see a dry period for a decade and then someone will emerge who'll be really interesting. New York is a bigger issue; it's shocking how much it has declined. Calvin, Ralph, Donna Karan seems like a golden age, that was the roaring eighties and nineties, and I don't see anything positive in the future of New York.

Since Raf Simons left Calvin Klein, how do those types of brands gain a renewed fashion interest or look to compete with their Parisian counterparts?

Cathy: They should be able to but that has always been the puzzle of New York, why can't a luxury brand get going there? Ralph is probably the only one, and I think that's down to the complete 100% dedication of Ralph Lauren to that idea; that is really what it takes. That's what drives the Arnaults to be dominant, and it's what drives the Dumas family at Hermès. But there isn't that commitment in New York, and I just think business crashes into everything. I think the speed of change in the United States is a big factor, too. People move on, that is our history; it's all change, change, change. With Ralph Lauren, they have been very smart over the years. Michael Kors, too. For me, it's not exciting fashion but it is who Michael is; he has come from bankruptcy to build that up, and he has good partners. That's rare because there is a shortage of partners in the United States. Ralph had great partners; Calvin had Barry Schwartz.[22] Calvin is now a public company and the whole situation with Raf was a great idea, but the moment the numbers started to flutter...

It was over before it even started.

Cathy: It was ambitious of Calvin Klein and its parent company, PVH, to hire Raf. Look at what Calvin Klein had – a runway legacy, the jeans and underwear, a history of provocative advertising and collaborating with great photographers, and good marketing. The elements were all there. And Raf is a thinker, as well as a team builder. But maybe the problem was, ultimately, a difference in expectations about how to accomplish everything. And don't forget that PVH is a public company – it has to be accountable to shareholders.

It almost felt like it was trying to replicate a European house hiring a designer, but without matching the culture of those companies.

Cathy: All those success stories in Europe are all partly a function of that designer and CEO connection. In New York, we do have some talents coming up. We have a really interesting designer in Elena Velez,[23] who I really like. She is very stripped down, very rough and raw. She is a spiritual child of McQueen's view of women and femininity, but a very hardcore look at it. I like all that. I like Christopher John Rogers, too. I am trying to think of others… I think Proenza had a great show last season; Marc Jacobs not showing again on a bigger stage, as part of fashion week or wherever in Paris or New York, is a shame; The Row, as you mentioned earlier, the Olsen sisters have moved to Paris...

Why do these labels go to Paris? For validation?

Cathy: They get more attention there. The Los Angeles designers Co skipped New York; they went straight to Paris. It just isn't a prestigious calendar in New York any more.

Are fewer people coming over for it?

Cathy: Yes, especially Europeans, I don't think I see any now.

‘Designers were now forced to talk to us backstage. I remember getting Claude Montana pushed in front of my microphone quivering like a newborn lamb.’

Moving along, how do you think this period of fashion will be considered in the long run, in terms of social history?

Tim: I think this time will be written about as a prelude to whatever comes next. I think whatever comes next is going to be a lot more major.

In what way major?

Tim: Climate change, and so on, World War III maybe, but all of this is a prelude to that. So I think fashion will be written about as just one more business that contributed to the destruction of the world: the giantism of multi-multi-billion-dollar companies, the insane levels of waste. When people are confronted by mountains of clothing in the future, as they already are in parts of Africa and India, these issues become insurmountable. They are currently tucked away in African countries or India or Turkey, but when you see Marine Serre or Priya Ahluwalia's films of those places where mass-produced clothes go to die, that is how I think fashion will be talked about.

Cathy: I'd agree with that, and I think that the issue of inequality and privilege is striking, too, because the prices of some of the ready-to-wear stuff we are writing about is kind of shocking. And the sheer waste. The amount of leather we are seeing on the runway startled me; in some of these shows there is so much of it. Like I said at the beginning, we are in this whirlpool; maybe people felt something similar in 1830, 1820 – at the end of that era of individual handmade creativity of the 18th century, and the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and mass production. If you think of digital technology as we know it, it's only been around for 15 years. So, we're in this bridge period where we still value craft tradition in fashion – this is what Vuitton and Hermès are selling – but the reality is, we're in this other era where the selling and marketing and the image matters more than ever before. People have only just got their teeth around the internet and Instagram and TikTok. In the future, Harvard Business School studies will be done about all that. For the creative part? In terms of design? Not so much.

It is ironic that for most of this past decade, the wealthiest individuals in the world have been in technology and communications – less manufacturing – and now they've been replaced by a man who is old school, who sells products and makes things.

Tim: You see, I do think there are germs of reaction, because you can't go on exalting practices that are ultimately abusive. You can't go on celebrating the ludicrous success of people like Elon Musk without creating a response that will be, I think, quietly virulent and quietly violent. As Cathy says, the world is only getting more inequal. We all read about Shell and BP's record profits last year because of the war in Ukraine, while at the same time people are unable to heat their homes. I mean, something has to give, surely! What was that movie where rich people floated around in space, while earth was a hellhole?[24]

Cathy: I do think there is a historical link to all this with how the super elite dressed up until the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. I think that we are kind of in that time again, and it is all about these luxury products. I am not sure that anyone can look that far ahead and see what sort of responsibility lies in their hands. Maybe they should. I mean, there *are* people making some strides in terms of being circular and reusing certain materials, but it is a drop in the ocean in the long run. I think Tim is right, at some point people *will* react to what fashion represents.

Tim: It's also worth considering if the designers themselves are actually comfortable with all this. I interviewed [Jil Sander designers] Luke and Lucie Meier yesterday and at one point we were discussing how they are trying to make their business as 'responsible' as can be. And I said, well as far as I'm concerned, fashion is this great paradox, it's a business that is built on consumption so it simply cannot be sustainable. And Luke said, 'There is the contradiction that's not easy for us to think about all the time either.' They looked rueful.

As observers and critics of fashion, do you feel that you should be scrutinising these aspects of the industry as intensely as you do the creativity on the catwalk?

Tim: Yes, especially because it still doesn't stand up to scrutiny. And the issues are too urgent for that. I love Gabriella Hearst's passion, but when she talks about how the future will be saved by a fusion of artists and scientists working together, it does beg the question, 'How soon?' Because it needs to be *now*!

Cathy: A lot of it does feel more like marketing. I feel like I do comment on it, and I am really struck by how we have sat through shows with 80 exits, and seen a lot of shows over the last 25 years where it's just like, 'What's the point of this stuff being on a runway?' I mean, talk about waste.

Tim: I guess I am trying to remain optimistic, but I have no crystal ball to gaze into. I do think that fashion does address something insanely primal; it's one of the most outward expressions of human desire, which is why it's a shame it gets so manipulated. Although desire exists to be corrupted, I guess. Fashion will always be there.

Will its focus shift away from the fashion designer?

Tim: I think that during the pandemic people realized that when the world thinks about fashion, it thinks about a creative individual. Whether it is an illusion or not, it is based on an individual doing something, making something, imagining something desirable that other people will want, whether that's bags, shoes or dresses. If you ask people what fashion is, I think most people would still say it is about designers, rather than gigantic multi-billion-dollar corporations sticking a shop on every street corner in the world.

I'm not so sure.

Tim: Really?

On a mainstream level, I find fashion represents an entry point to a kind of generic luxury lifestyle that people associate with the Ritz, private jets, strutting with attitude for TikTok, wearing your look. I think the lifestyle aspiration is, for many people, more alluring than the actual design of, say, a Saint Laurent dress or a Vuitton bag.

Tim: Like the Kardashian-ization of fashion. I think the theme of this conversation is that the whole idea of what fashion's initial impulses were has gotten bigger – the illusion got bigger, the aspiration got bigger. Now, the aspiration isn't simply to have that little dress or that little designer bag, it's to have the private jet to walk onto holding the bag or wearing the dress.

‘What do I feel about the Kardashians? They were born from a sex tape and a reality show, so in that respect they're consummate emblems of the times.’

I'm interested to get your thoughts on the Kardashian and Jenner phenomenon. Ten years ago, they were on the slightly unfashionable sidelines of the fashion industry. But over the past decade they've become such a potent catalyst for fashion's links to the wider consumer world.

Cathy: I remember when the Kardashians and the Jenners were seated at the Balmain shows and everybody was going, 'What the hell?' Which is weird in a way, why the Kardashians and the Jenners have raised such a concern in fashion. Like, 'Oh my god, it's reality TV!' which was seen as weird, and yet they were the beginning of that wave of all types of celebrities coming in. Musical artists and reality stars. The more extreme physically, the more outrageous, it was all OK. Now it feels like the Jenners and the Kardashians are...

...the establishment?

Cathy: Well, they are the benchmark. They're at Balenciaga; they're at Versace. They're modelling for all these different brands; Kim has her own shapewear business. They are all doing something, and I don't think the interest in them has waned. I just think we've all become quite blasé about it, because we're so used to seeing all these people on the front row.

What about you, Tim?

Tim: What do I feel about the Kardashians? Well, they were born from a sex tape and a reality show, so in that respect they are consummate emblems of the times. Did they find fashion or did fashion find them? Who was the significant figure in the whole thing? Is it the mother? She certainly managed to transform four or five quite ordinary people into these paragons of aspirational fantasia. Fashion didn't transform the Kardashians, the Kardashians transformed fashion, and when you see all those women in the street with their puffed-up lips and puffed-up butts, you understand that is all about the Kardashians making a style. I wonder how much of a part cynicism played in all this? You know, is Kris Jenner the supreme ironist of pop culture? Is she the Warhol who's made them all superstars?

Which aspects of this do you see as interesting?

Tim: I hate to say it, but it kind of passed me by. What is fascinating about it is the way it is so utterly transparent and yet seems so convincing to people. Like a play and a ploy. When you look at something that isn't in your ethos or your aesthetic in any way, and yet it seems to be so seductive to so many millions of people, then you do think, 'Oh, this is why I feel really out of place in the human race!' Don't get me wrong, I would never judge people for loving the Kardashians, but I was completely mystified. But then again, I never got reality TV either, I never got *The Osbournes*, *Big Brother*, all those things. I just thought no, it is all around us, we don't need to see it on television every minute. That's why I was fascinated, because I just didn't get it. But when I *did* talk to Kim Kardashian, she was really lovely, and was kind of funny. Like, it's a joke that she is in on. Well, you would hope that, and I guess maybe she is. And I certainly think that she is still capable of surprising us in some way.

'There's an historical link to how the elite dressed up until the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. It's the same now, but with luxury products.'

They definitely have their part to play in what people now refer to as the 'attention economy'. Certainly, attention is the goal – in fashion, like everywhere else – and yet it seems to be a fine line between good and bad attention. Fashion has seen its fair share of car crashes over the past decade, but how is this affecting fashion in general, and the role of the designer as a public figure? Miuccia Prada said she no longer feels particularly comfortable doing interviews for fear of being misquoted. But when designers are fearful of speaking, doesn't it become damaging to the whole ecosystem of fashion?

Cathy: That's a good point. It is a challenge that journalists are increasingly going to face, getting access to designers to really talk about what they do, otherwise it'll become a very manufactured process. It can already seem very canned at times, which is troubling. When I think about my backstage interviews with Lagerfeld, I just think how incredibly generous he was with his time. By inviting you into the Chanel studio before the show, you got to understand, what his references were. He recognized the value in doing that.

Tim: I would say that designers are much more attuned to interviews and that whole self-promotion process than they ever were before. In days of yore, designers like Ungaro or Saint Laurent were *terrible* interviewees because they simply weren't used to it. There was no precedent for being available to the press all the time, even in a controlled way. Now everybody appreciates that's part of the game; they need to have a schtick. But I don't think that is just fashion, it's everything. Every contestant on every reality show knows they need a backstory.

Cathy: There are some designers who do still give you time, who are generous with their reflections on fashion or broader topics. But as a consequence of the brands becoming bigger and bigger, the designers are becoming increasingly remote from that process, and more distant from the people in the media who can actually talk and write about fashion intelligently. Perhaps the shift is more towards the influencers.

Influencers are good for business. Journalists aren't always good for business, even though they may stimulate progress or elicit some kind of self-reflection.

Cathy: I don't believe that. I think most designers continue to think the journalists and the critics *are* necessary. I certainly hear that more than I have ever heard it in the past – from the designers and the people around them. They know there are a shrinking number of good journalists and good critics, who have a longevity, a history in the business, and who can talk to them about their past in fashion. That is not to say there won't be new writers and critics coming in; thankfully there are. I think the good designers still value that, but some of them are closing shop.

Tim: What is happening in fashion is happening everywhere: if people would rather not talk, that's not just fashion designers. As I mentioned earlier, I think that with the supermodel moment 30 years ago, fashion became a branch of the entertainment industry. And that was when PRs began to realize that their clients needed to be doing not just press interviews but mainstream media interviews – to be part of the new world. So you'd see designers getting lured backstage after a show and being forced to say something when they were exhausted and fraught. I remember getting Claude Montana pushed in front of my microphone quivering like a newborn lamb. Over the years, people wised up to that and learned how to do it, and then you'd have Tom Ford demanding 'Three questions only!' That became the policy everybody seemed to be adopting, which was kind of ridiculous because there were people you wouldn't even want to ask three questions to!

'The fashion industry might say it's preoccupied with sustainability, but there's something fundamentally unsustainable about fashion.'

All that now seems rather innocent compared to today's era, where the constant gaze of social media can feel like CCTV.

Cathy: That's new media. If you think of Olivier Rousteing as an early adoptee of social media and Instagram, he was really on it when it comes to how to engage with the customers and the wider world. If you talk to Olivier now, I find that he is a little burned out by the whole thing and has been terrorized by it.

Tim: With social media there is a different weight to the words. And from there you have cancel culture, and everyone wondering what they can or can't say. So now there is an additional layer in the communications, which is like a minefield that everyone is negotiating.

Is that here to stay?

Tim: I think that it's an evolutionary thing because we don't really know where social media is going to end up. Do we go to a time of complete honesty? Does that become the best way forward, where everyone is honest and says what they think, and everyone is given an opportunity to explain what they meant when they say something that jars with an audience? Which doesn't exist at the moment. You are just tried and sentenced in a heartbeat and there is no recourse. Will there come a time when people might accept that this was a really strange, extremely insecure, unhappy moment, where aggression and victimhood were kind of your only two options? I don't know.

Finally, what can you say about the next decade in Paris fashion? Or rather, what could an LVMH or a Dior look like in ten years' time?

Cathy: Assuming LVMH and Kering are managed properly, those companies will just get bigger and bigger because that is their pattern. Their shareholders and the owners expect growth. So, I think that continues, and so we'll see fashion houses entering an ever-larger phase. They might get more involved in film – in the way Saint Laurent have announced they're going into production – or in having even bigger shows, or events at the Stade de France. I remember Lagerfeld saying to me years ago, in the early 2000s, that Chanel's annual show budget – two couture, two ready-to-wear and one *métiers d'art* – was something like €20 million. That seemed an astonishing amount – then. And it *was*, considering the kind of sets that Chanel built in the Grand Palais. And now we have resort collections staged in places like Seoul and Rio. And also shows that require enormous sound stages to create make-believe worlds. Think of some of Demna's spectacular shows for Balenciaga.

Tim: Those resort shows alone must cost ridiculous sums of money.

Cathy: But I do sometimes wonder, is all of that brand power that's built on old heritage names actually to the detriment of fashion, because it doesn't feed enough innovation? I guess someone could come into Chanel and take all those delicious references and make something new out of it and we will sit there and go, 'That is amazing.' I think that is the beauty of some of these houses like Chanel, Saint Laurent and Balenciaga. Again, I praise Demna for what he has done for Balenciaga, who knew that could happen? Somebody could do that with Gaultier. *Should* do that with Gaultier. It is ripe for the picking, and we need that. But I just hope that there is *one* new voice that emerges, a new aesthetic in the next ten years.

Just *one* person – I only need one.

It's gone from Lagerfeld's three designers in a decade to just one.

Cathy: I am OK with one.

So, for you that one person this past decade would be Demna, right?

Cathy: Yes, I'd say it's been Demna. And I think the example of Mrs Prada and Raf has been really instructive, and it would be nice to see that at other companies. Giorgio Armani, are you listening? They should bring in someone, with the open acknowledgement that they will be taking over when the founder is ready to retire. But when it comes to the individual rising out of nowhere, hungry talent, I think one will do. I am doubtful – the odds are so against it happening because of the size and the amount of real estate that the big groups all control. I think that the excessiveness with the brands, the way that mass culture works, the way that globalization works, all these things are in their favour, and they don't really help the young designers coming out of nowhere. But I do think that across all fields there is always a counter reaction – whether it is an art or food movement, organic or climate change – that reverse situation when people start embracing smaller entities. So, it *is* possible. Obviously a lot of talent is out there, but it is figuring out how to exist on a smaller scale. The people who cover fashion and the people who go to Paris, we are all used to those big daring talents who get on that stage. That is still the benchmark.

Tim: How I see it, the question about the future is bigger than the answer that fashion could provide. Going back to what we were talking about before, it is interesting how there is so little ethical leadership coming from the people who are allegedly in charge of our lives. Wouldn't it be amazing if it was fashion that could offer some kind of leadership? It seems like a bizarre enough idea that it could actually work. Like, fashion suddenly thinks, 'Hang on, we've got all this money; we employ all these people; we are an economic force in the world, and we have had an incredibly negative impact – let's see if we can turn that around.' And maybe… although it seems inconceivable within the next decade.

You could also ask the question, 'Does one person really need to own €200 billion worth of assets when €10 billion is perfectly reasonable?'

Tim: Ten *million* is perfectly reasonable! Bernard Arnault could give away three quarters of his wealth and make a massive difference, he alone, to the future of the planet. I wonder if these thoughts ever cross his mind? I mean, ultimately, what does one man do with €200 billion? This is a question for the future of fashion.

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1. Jean-Louis Costes and Gilbert Costes opened Hôtel Costes at 239 Rue Saint-Honoré in 1995. It is now seen as a pioneer in the 'boutique hotels' sector, with its design-led approach (initially by Jacques Garcia, more recently by Christian Liaigre), small-scale, exclusive atmosphere, and 'fusion' food offer. In the late 1990s, a series of musical compilations for the hotel by Parisian DJ Stéphane Pompougnac were international hits, raising the hotel's profile even further.

2. La Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture was founded in 1911, replacing an original organization founded by Charles Frederick Worth in 1868. Members of the Chambre must meet specific criteria such as the number of collections and the ateliers being located in Paris. It is part of the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, which manages and schedules Paris Fashion Week.

3. The original Langosteria restaurant at Via Savona 10 in Milan was opened in 2007. The Paris outpost is located in the Cheval Blanc Paris, a five-star hotel in the Samaritaine building that opened in 2021. LVMH owns both Cheval Blanc and La Samaritaine.

4. 'The lunch spent in the restaurant was an epic culinary adventure,' wrote Italian Trip Advisor user Dean Roper of his meal at Le Petit Vendôme in February 2023. 'A battle for taste delivered with flavours and fragrances. The wine, a noble ally in our undertaking, supported our palates in the most difficult moments. The atmosphere, imbued with an unparalleled beauty, made us feel part of an ancient and mysterious legend. Finally, the coffee, the ultimate victory, sealed our triumph over the forces of mediocrity. An experience that left us with indelible memories, like a chivalrous endeavour to tell our children and grandchildren about.'

5. Canadian TV show *Fashion File* was presented by Tim Blanks from its debut in 1989 until he left the show in late 2006. In 2007, CBC broadcast *Fashion File Host Hunt*, a reality show to choose a new host for the show; journalist Adrian Mainella was chosen. CBC cancelled the show in March 2009 citing budgetary reasons.

6. Peter Lindbergh photographed Naomi Campbell, Tatjana Patitz, Christy Turlington, Linda Evangelista, and Cindy Crawford in New York's Meatpacking District for the cover of the January 1990 issue of British *Vogue*. 'We weren't photographed with a ton of hair and make-up,' recalled Cindy Crawford in *Vogue* in 2016. 'We were quite undone. Coming out of the Eighties, which was all big hair and boobs pushed up, it felt refreshing and new.'

7. Gucci Group purchased Saint Laurent in 1999; McQueen in 2000; and Balenciaga in 2001.

8. In 1997's *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, the character Dr Evil awakes from a cryogenic sleep after 30 years and suggests holding the world to ransom for $1 million. Told that this is now a small amount of money, he raises it to $100 billion. Mike Myers, who wrote the film and plays Dr Evil, has expressed his surprise at how the scene became so popular 'because it's sort of a fragile joke'.

9. Patrick Cox moved to London from his native Canada aged 19 to study shoe design at Cordwainers Technical College. In 1984, while still a student, he designed shoes for Vivienne Westwood's *Clint Eastwood* collection, as well as for BodyMap and, in 1986, John Galliano. He founded his company in 1985 and in 1993 his diffusion line Wannabe became a huge hit, known for its chunky heeled loafers. Cox left his own business after it was sold in 2006, before opening a patisserie in London's Soho. He returned to shoe design in 2016.

10. In 1976, Yves Saint Laurent used the Salon Impérial of the Hôtel Inter-Continental on Rue de Castiglione for his Autumn/Winter 1976, *Opéras – Ballets russes*. The Second Empire splendour of the room was perfectly suited to the collection, which he later described as 'opulent'.

11. Born in Maastricht, Josephus Thimister studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp and served as an assistant to Karl Lagerfeld before being appointed creative director of Balenciaga aged just 30. He left in 1997 (to be replaced by Nicolas Ghesquière) and founded his own label, which he closed in 2004. After working for Charles Jourdan, he reopened his label in 2011, only to close it again in 2013. He committed suicide in November 2019 aged 57.

12. Paris-based American journalist Diane Pernet has run her blog A Shaded View of Fashion since 2005.

13. Kim Jones chose the Pyramids of Giza as the location for the Dior Pre-Fall 2023 menswear collection entitled *Celestial*.

14. The answer to Tim's question is a 'closed collection'.

15. Once a Franciscan monastery, the Couvent des Cordeliers has in more recent times hosted – in what was once the refectory – shows by Haider Ackermann, Hussein Chalayan, Comme des Garçons, Ann Demeulemeester, Hermès, Isabel Marant, Alexander McQueen, Valentino, Kris Van Assche, Dries Van Noten, and Vivienne Westwood.

16. The show was Jean Paul Gaultier Spring/Summer 1995, but Madonna did not push a baby in a pram, but a white bichon frisé puppy. After the show, Gaultier took his bow arm in arm with the singer and did his press interview in a magician's box that revealed only his head.

17. Tim Blanks chose Romeo Gigli's Spring/Summer 1990 show, the designer's Paris debut, as one of his 'Top Fashion Shows of All-Time' for Business of Fashion. 'Gigli offered a new silhouette,' he wrote. 'Cocoon coats, and cutaway jackets that skimmed the body, with shawl collars and soft, "real" shoulders; high-waisted trousers that were as skinny as leggings; skirts with a tulip, or heart, shape that swaddled the legs.' Not to mention the beads of Murano glass that tinkled on earrings and diadems.

18. Raf Simons' *History of My World* Spring/Summer 2005 was held in the Cité de l'Industrie, in the Parc de la Villette and was described by Tim Blanks as 'stunning'.

19. The Craig Green show Blanks dubbed the 'Children's Crusade' was Spring/Summer 2015 menswear. The Children's Crusade was a religious movement that emerged in 1212 and was, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* 'arguably the first European youth movement', and the reason why 'thousands of young people took Crusading vows and set out to recover Jerusalem from the Muslims'.

20. David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* premiered at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival. Starring Viggo Mortensen and Léa Seydoux, it featured the director's trademark themes of body modification, consumerism and the society of spectacle.

21. 'I despise simplicity,' said British designer Norman Hartnell, 'it is the negation of all that is beautiful.' his embellished style made him the favourite designer of British high society, particularly the late Queen Elizabeth II. He designed both her wedding dress and the dress she wore for her coronation in 1952. In 1977, he was the first British fashion designer to be knighted.

22. In 1968, Barry Schwartz lent Calvin Klein $10,000 to create samples for his nascent fashion line. He later became CEO of the company, as well as a thoroughbred horse owner and breeder. In 2020, Stonewall Farm, his 740-acre estate in Westchester County, north of New York, was put on sale for $100 million.

23. Elena Velez is a fashion designer and artist from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, based in New York. She studied at Parsons School of Design and Central Saint Martins. Her work, which is known for 'its non-traditional synthesis of metalwork and high fashion', made its first official New York Fashion Week debut in September 2021.

24. Directed by Neill Blomkamp, *Elysium* starred Matt Damon and Jodie Foster, and was released in 2013.

Loïc Prigent & Eugénie Trochu

‘We are in this incredible paradox of analytics. When I release content today, the amount of information I have about my audience is nuts. I know which country it works in, the average age of the people who watch it, and whether they are men or women. But the actual control I have over whether a video I make will perform or not is zero. Zero! I recently did some K-pop-focused videos that got tens of millions of views on YouTube, but then got fewer than 1,000 views on TikTok. There is no single recipe, that simply doesn’t exist. So you just have to do decent quality content all the time, because if something suddenly gets millions of views and it’s crap, that’s all anyone will remember you for.’

Interview by Dan Thawley

Sat in a nondescript corner boardroom on the sixth floor of Condé Nast's headquarters in the tony eighth arrondissement of Paris, *Vogue* France's head of editorial content Eugénie Trochu points across the leafy street towards an impossibly high indoor climbing wall. Colleagues from the 103-year-old magazine, she says, have recently signed up to scale it out of office hours. Sound like the *Vogue* glamazons of yore? Not quite. Wearing a navy sweatshirt with a cartoon Eiffel Tower and the skyline of Paris emblazoned across the chest, blue jeans and sneakers, a Repossi diamond ring is the only giveaway of Trochu's lofty post in the upper echelons of Condé Nast global editorial director Anna Wintour's new guard of millennial 'heads of content'. These young professionals have replaced the previous generation of editors in chief at *Vogue* titles across the globe, but what's really the difference? In Trochu's case, she's a digital native and cut her teeth on the magazine's digital output, before climbing the masthead. Today she shares cover stories and content with other *Vogue* editions, driving the French market while diversifying its readership by showcasing new voices and body types across the magazine's pages. One of Trochu's first jobs was to manage the magazine's change of name from *Vogue* Paris to *Vogue* France in 2021, aligning the title with the brand's new international standards. Other developments include more mutualized content, such as a recent cover shoot that was shared with *Vogue* Germany, *Vogue* Italia, and *Vogue* España. It saw a diverse group of new models photographed in different holiday spots across Europe on and off 'Vogue Rail', celebrating the ease and sustainability of train travel across the continent in the summer months. Many readers might have simply seen a band of travelling beauties exuding a carefree sense of summertime abandon in dresses by advertisers like Ferragamo, Prada and Michael Kors. Others – a catty few – might have seen four covers for the price of one. Yet in this world of excruciating excess, international cooperation and shared budgets can surely only be an intelligent way forward.

'I remember my first day at Vogue.fr so clearly because I had to start writing stories straight away. My first article was published that same day.'

Seated next to Eugénie at the boardroom table, bespectacled filmmaker and cultural commentator Loïc Prigent is all smiles in a flannelette shirt, signature baseball cap, and a scruffy five o'clock shadow. *His* rise in fashion to become one of the industry's most sought-after directors and front-row fixtures has nothing to do with internal shuffling and promotion, and everything to do with his witty social commentary and an approachable personal brand that has seen him move from being a freelance writer for the French daily paper *Libération* in the mid-nineties to TV fashion commentator Mademoiselle Agnès's wingman in the 2000s to today's social-media darling and documentary filmmaker. Prigent was both a loyal collaborator and confidante to the late Karl Lagerfeld and has been a vocal champion of young French designers over the years, from a young Olivier Rousteing to Victor Weinsanto, Jeanne Friot, and Charaf Tajer of Casablanca. His infectious enthusiasm for the spectacle of fashion is broadcast across diverse media, from his wildly popular (yet currently dormant) Twitter account relaying gossip and outrageous hyperbole overheard behind fashion's closed doors, to his dynamic YouTube channel, and regular fashion segments on French TV network, TMC.

Trochu, 34, from the countryside in Normandy, and Prigent, 49, from the coast of Brittany, have long lived parallel Parisian fashion experiences: she in the third, second and now front rows of the shows; he backstage, before and after, capturing the precious off-duty moments of designers, models and celebrities as they experience the shows season after season. Both have experienced dozens of fashion shows, presentations and press junkets year after year, some by choice, others in the line of duty, but all feeding the insatiable curiosity and enthusiasm that they display for an industry that has, with time, embraced them with open arms. Up on the sixth floor, the pair unpacked the last decade with *System* and how, thanks to good manners and tongues firmly in cheeks, they've navigated the pitfalls of Paris fashion with sanity, kindness, and one eye firmly fixed on the future of fashion media.

Paris, 24 April 2023

Dan Thawley: So, let's look back at the year 2013…

Loïc Prigent: It seems like another century. We've been through so much since then. Covid felt like 10 years in itself! Everything has changed. So many new people have emerged.

It's a period that notably saw the exponential growth of social media in fashion.

Eugénie Trochu: And youth as well, I would say, there are more and more young people now at the centre of this industry. I think before it was much more about older people.

Yes, absolutely. There have been huge changes in the media, in design and even at CEO level.

Loïc: Well, it changes every six months…

Eugénie: Yes – even this morning, with Charles de Vilmorin leaving Rochas.

Loïc: Oh, what a shame!

'The industry is still full of princesses and aristocrats but the doors have been opened, and lots of new people have arrived – it wasn't easy though.'

The designer roulette wheel is crazy, for sure. But Paris has always been a hub, an incubator for global creation. It has become much more global now, we all agree on that, I'm sure.

Eugénie: In Paris, there were things that I adored. Also, the Paris shows are much longer – the 'week' is twice as long.

Loïc: Paris this March was very anxiety inducing, with all the demonstrations about the retirement age.

Eugénie: Then there's this new generation of fans who create a certain atmosphere; it's almost impossible to get into the shows. Did you go to Valentino? It was so hard to get in.

Acne Studios, too.

Eugénie: I didn't think I was ever going to get into Acne Studios.

Loïc: The entrance at Dior was like the Stade de France during a World Cup final.

All because of one guest!

Loïc: And Kim Jones' Dior show in January was madness, too.

So Paris isn't dead!

Eugénie: No, it isn't dead, Paris will always be number one, but it needs to watch out because Milan is catching up. Do Milan Fashion Week and you'll see!

Loïc: Really, that much?

Eugénie: Yes, because of this new wave of designers at certain houses, like Maximilian [Davis] at Ferragamo, Matthieu [Blazy] at Bottega, Marco De Vincenzo at Etro. I think that the best shows in terms of creativity and youthfulness were in Milan.

Loïc: To me, one week at Milan Fashion Week is as exciting as one day in Paris.

Eugénie: No, really, I promise you. We did a special about Milanese fashion in the February 2023 issue. I feel like Milan is really youthful.

Loïc: Hmm, I don't know; Dolce and Gabbana feel like 300 years old between the two of them. Armani feels like 300 years old on his own! They are old, and to me, it's the same show every time. Every time! Honestly, respect to the people who write about Armani every season.

Eugénie: I have a lot of respect for Monsieur Armani.

Loïc: Me, too!

Eugénie: In terms of audience, whatever happens around him, he has an aura and is a superstar designer, the show is always heaving. Women are just so inspired by him.

So that's 2023, but let's rewind 10 years. Where were you in 2013, Loïc?

Loïc: *Oh là là*! I was working with Mademoiselle Agnès at Canal+. I don't think Bolloré[1] had got his hands on it yet. We did a show every semester, so the energy wasn't at all the same. I was just starting to use Twitter.

Eugénie: You weren't as tired!

Loïc: Oh, it was exhausting even back then!

Eugénie: Was it harder then or now?

Loïc: I prefer now.

Eugénie: Even though you do three times as much.

Loïc: Ten times as much, but I still prefer it now. Back then I was posting on Instagram; I was starting to post silly things on Twitter. I don't use Twitter any more because it's too toxic.

You don't use it at all?

Loïc: No, no.

Eugénie: Did you get cancelled?

Loïc: No, I cancelled Twitter!

Did you have a lot of followers?

Loïc: Yes, it really was my media; people associate me with that platform. I didn't close the account; I just stopped using it. When there were events going on in Paris, it was useful, like a Rolodex to see new talents emerging, but I don't go there any more. I'm more Instagram, TikTok and YouTube now; I'm very YouTube-centric. I work for [TV network] TMC, too. I never would have thought I'd work for the TF1 group. But today any 'subversion' there was on [French] television has really moved from Canal + to TF1.[2]

Eugénie: But do you think you can be open? Aren't you a bit censored today with everything you do?

Loïc: Yes, sometimes I have to be careful. But not on TMC, not at all.

Eugénie: Do you self-censor? Do you sometimes think, 'I can't say that because it would be too harsh on him or her?' For example, when Carla Bruni joked about Covid, maybe you wouldn't broadcast that today?

Loïc: Carla Bruni and I spoke about all that, and I stand by it; I would do it all over again.[3] Like, come on, Carla, you coughed in people's faces at the beginning of a pandemic! I was already in lockdown, as we had been in Milan, so my team were already respecting the rules. She was coughing and being insolent. She was looking for trouble; there were cameras everywhere. It really wasn't a laughing matter at that point, but she was hit by a veritable tornado, as if she was responsible for the whole pandemic. The Italians hated her. I was so sorry that it happened to her, but at the moment I broadcast it, I did it with the best intentions. It was shown in the same context; I was the only one in France to have respected the quarantine. So, do I take care? Yes. I have learned there are loads of words that are taboo, and there are lots of grey zones. So, since 2013, I have a lot more filters in place.

> **'I was talking with a haute-couture house recently, and they were saying they can't accept new clients because they aren't able to keep up with orders.'**

Back then you worked in tandem with Mademoiselle Agnès, but she was the public face.

Loïc: Yes, the first season, in fact we both did the voice-overs, but it was she who asked the questions while I was doing the filming. The first season I did without Agnès, I was so nervous that I got ocular migraines. I had these terrible headaches, and I realized how hard it was. It was really intense.

Filming and asking questions?

Loïc: Yes, plus it was a new format for the show I was working on and I was looking for gossip. That changed the way I worked and then when YouTube arrived, that completely changed my way of working again. I could go much deeper and ask people lots of questions. I'm generally pretty shy.

Eugénie: You were also looking for people who were emerging on YouTube and weren't that famous yet.

Show attendance has also really changed, hasn't it? In 2013, you could think of it as just press and high society, princesses and so on.

Loïc: That hasn't changed – now we just call them nepo-babies!

Eugénie: What did we call them then, socialites?

They were the only ones at the shows.

Eugénie: Along with actors and actresses. I think it was almost embarrassing to have musicians at the shows. I don't think a brand would have invited a K-pop star back then.

On that front, it has really changed.

Eugénie: Some brands would never have invited them to the shows before, even if they were huge stars. Those brands are much more open now. Before it was just a lot of socialites in the front row, all very beautiful, perfectly made-up and so on. Back then it was really like in Robert Altman's film *Prêt-à-Porter,* he captured the front row really well. I mean that was more the nineties than 2013, but still they all looked like each other in the front row.

Did you feel like you were a fashion outsider in 2013, Loïc? And do you feel like an insider now?

Loïc: To be honest, I still feel like an outsider. There was a moment when I felt like an insider, and that was during Covid. As I mentioned, for the first season I was in quarantine, and I had collaborators who went to film the shows in Paris, but the following season, I was the only guest at some shows. I was the only one, literally; I saw a Vuitton show and I was the only one there! I filmed all the preparations for the Chanel show at Château de Chenonceau, where Kirsten Stewart was the only person in the audience.

Eugénie: I went to Dior at Versailles. That was incredible. It was a ready-to-wear show. There weren't any journalists.

Loïc: There was another one of our colleagues and she wasn't allowed to say she was there.

Like with Chanel in the quarry, too.

Loïc: Yes, in Les Baux-de-Provence, that season I felt like an insider. The very next season, I can tell you, they made me fully understand that I was an outsider again! When everyone came back, it was a nightmare all over again; I felt like an intern again. All the snobs came back.

Eugénie, in 2013, you had just started at *Vogue*.

Eugénie: It's quite annoying, but when I started my current job, I made the mistake of saying I had started as an intern, when of course nearly everyone starts as an intern! But now people still call me 'the intern'! I'd really like to move away from that. What is pretty amazing is that I did start as an intern in 2011; I've moved up a few rungs of the ladder since then! In fact, I remember the first time that you and I, Dan, met was at Barcelona Fashion Week that summer. That was my first ever full fashion week.

Loïc: Oh, that's so cute!

Eugénie: Yes, so I did my first internship at American *Vogue* in Paris on the Place du Palais Bourbon, with Fiona Darin, who is still working there today; she's still in charge of American *Vogue* in France. I was sending clothes for shoots, and I was lucky to work there for two months which happened to be during fashion week. It was amazing because you had to organize the whole team's agendas and calendars. You had André Leon Talley who came; you had Anna [Wintour], Phyllis Posnick, Virginia Smith. We had to organize their days and do one or two specific things, like getting special things for Anna or for André, and the Starbucks, of course, in the morning.

It starts early in the day, doesn't it? Anna's famous for her 8am meetings.

> **'If you get photographed outside a show, it's like you've been validated, in a way. I see it as a bit of a competition between the women at fashion week.'**

Eugénie: We had to be there at eight in the morning. It started early, but it also finished early. What is pretty amazing is that Fiona recruited a lot of girls who are still working here today, with Anna, including Francesca Ragazzi[4] and me. I did that for two months, but I needed a three-month internship for my university.

Which university were you at?

Eugénie: I was at the Sorbonne, and I couldn't validate my master's there with just those two months, so I thought I'd apply to *Vogue* France, and they saw I'd been at American *Vogue* and took me on quite quickly for three months on digital. At the time we were writing across *Vogue*, *Glamour* and *GQ* all at once. I was working more on *Vogue*, but I was also doing shopping sections for *Glamour* and a few things for *GQ*. I didn't do any styling; it was all shopping articles. I remember my first day at Vogue.fr so clearly because I had to write my first stories straight away. They were called 'Look of the Day' at the time. So, my first article was published on my first day. It's still like that now, the intern journalists get published on the site with their own byline. Then they offered me another three months and later asked me to stay full time. I was fashion editor, so I was in charge of fashion under the direction of Jennifer Neyt. That lasted quite a long time, nearly 10 and a half years. Then during Covid, Emmanuelle [Alt] asked me to take on more responsibility as fashion market editor, so dealing with the advertisers and so on. It was pretty intense because I was doing the fashion column *and* the marketing. And in 2021, thanks to a global editorial reorganization at Condé Nast and a desire to be more anchored in the digital, I was offered the position of head of editorial content at *Vogue* France.

I remember that you were quite criticized by people when you got this job.

Eugénie: In fact, what happened is, with journalists today, sometimes you say things and then they take shortcuts! There was, at that time, a misunderstanding about my degree because I hadn't finished my last year of my master's as I was directly appointed to *Vogue* as fashion editor. But I have a *licence* [French undergraduate degree] and did a year of my master's degree. I am not fond of shortcuts because they create biases, and people see you as someone you are not. This is why I don't like talking about personal information either, about my family or my marital status, for example. It just puts you in a box instead of focusing on the work you deliver.

Neither of you were born into the circles of the Paris elite. What have you observed in terms of the city's old guard changing in the past decade? Has it just meant that instead of princesses in the front row, it's now influencers?

Loïc: When I started working in fashion, longer ago than you, I really felt there was a ceiling, and the guardians of that ceiling are still there. I think there are still princes, princesses and aristocrats, but the doors and the windows have opened, and there are lots of new people who have arrived. But it wasn't easy. Ten years ago, Suzy Menkes described it as a circus when she wrote about the bloggers.

Eugénie: There's another journalist, who I won't name, but she recently described the front row at a Gucci show as a circus, too.

If we consider Paris as the fashion capital, it represents a lot more than just brands from LVMH and Kering, it is also a big hub for international shows six times a year: menswear, womenswear, and haute couture. Brands flock from everywhere to show in Paris. What is Paris's allure today?

Eugénie: You can look at someone like Victoria Beckham. She's shown in all the fashion capitals apart from Milan; she's done London, New York, and now, she's settled on Paris. A notion I pitched when we launched the idea of *Vogue* France was that France, not just Paris, is a laboratory of fashion ideas, but the essence of what we do draws its inspiration from this city.

Loïc: It's also about the romance of the shows in Paris, ever since the glory days of Yves Saint Laurent, Chanel – it's always been Paris. Jean Paul Gaultier, Rei Kawakubo, and Yohji Yamamoto all came to Paris. And now the romance of Jacquemus…

So, it's about the long history of fashion in France that continues to seduce the world. The idea of the runway show was born in Paris and is anchored in Paris: the vision of a model walking in a couture salon with a paddle in her hand.

Loïc: The geography, the mise-en-scène, the dramatology, that is all French in a way. So it was [Jeanne] Paquin, but it was also [Charles Frederick] Worth, because foreigners have also always come to work here.

Putting on a fashion show in Paris remains the ultimate grail for many designers.

Eugénie: But there are way too many shows...

Loïc: And a lot of them are rubbish. Today when I talk to people who are building their brands, I realize that they're often really pushed into doing shows, but are actually really scared of them. They're so disorientated.

Eugénie: I have to go to a lot, to the big French brands and then all the young designers, so you end up attending up to 10 shows a day.

Loïc: The most recent fashion week was insane. With shows at 9pm, we were totally handcuffed to this crazy schedule. It's like, OK, if they wanted to be live on Instagram for certain time zones, I get it, but sometimes it was just capricious. I think it's because someone told them that a night show was chic. They're just copying Anthony Vaccarello and his night-time shows for Saint Laurent.

I'm interested in what you both think about the significance of haute couture today. The word 'couture' is overused by everyone to signify a silhouette, a sense of quality, et cetera, but the Fédération de la Haute Couture has a very specific list of things that truly denotes haute couture. Over the past 10 years we've been a bit saturated by the idea of couture; it even gets used to describe cakes!

Eugénie: I'm guilty of that! I've overused it in articles, because straight away it gives this allure, like, 'Wow, it's couture!'

Loïc: I find the haute-couture schedule has really diminished. I mean, yes, it's this ultimate craftsmanship, but there really aren't very many who practice it, especially compared to the excess of the ready-to-wear. Haute-couture week these days is really disappointing; there is barely one decent show a day, and the week only lasts four days.

Eugénie: There are some new people arriving…

Beyond what is good or not good, it has become a sort of free-for-all moment, with men's and ready-to-wear brands also showing during haute couture…

Eugénie: Maybe there is not enough renewal because it's so hard to get the haute-couture label, and we're talking about something that is much less in demand.

Loïc: That said, I was talking to the team at a haute-couture house recently, and they were saying they can't accept new clients because they aren't able to keep up with orders! To me, I think that since 2013, it's the emergence of the menswear calendar that has been really remarkable, and things really happen there. The designers who show off schedule, that's totally new. Now, you can spend your year travelling to the shows around the world. In fact, when I'm editing my show for TMC, I don't know how many shows I have to skip – shows happen all over the world, all the time.

Eugénie: I struggle with that to be honest.

Loïc: A 4-day trip for a 12-minute show!

Eugénie: With the way things stand in the world today, it's kind of important that we stop putting so much CO_2 into the atmosphere. When you calculate all these shows around the world, it's alarming.

Loïc: I counted the number of trees that it costs us – Julien [Da Costa, camera man] and I – to travel: 60 mature trees a year.

Eugénie: What do you do? How do you compensate for that? At Condé Nast, we now have quite a logical process in place whereby whichever *Vogue* team is nearest to where the show is taking place, they attend. So, for example, if something is in Italy, *Vogue* Italia covers it.

Loïc: That's great.

Eugénie: But of course, brands are always keen to count *Vogue* France among them though.

'This season, *everyone* started filming when there were outfits made of feathers, anything in the colour orange, or anything featuring Naomi.'

Loïc: I don't do every destination show either.

This decade has really turned you two from spectators into professional commentators. You really learned the ropes backstage…

Loïc: I think we met backstage, actually.

Eugénie: Yes, Emmanuelle asked me to ask you and Agnès if something 'was *Vogue*' or 'not *Vogue*'!

I wanted to ask you both about politeness in the industry. I get the impression that after so many shows today, the audience rushes to leave the building before the designer has even finished taking their bow!

Eugénie: Don't you find that the rudest people are also the most respected? I think that we're very nice and friendly, and polite, but then we're the ones who get walked over. I think if we had princess attitudes, we'd be much more respected and perhaps have more legitimacy even. Perhaps we'd have been welcomed with open arms!

Loïc: Now people film *themselves* instead of the show.

Eugénie: Look at the shows, everyone is still filming…

Loïc: This season I saw people filming when there were outfits made of feathers. As soon as there was something spectacular, they filmed. They filmed anything orange, and anything featuring Naomi [Campbell]. So, Naomi in orange – that was the real winner! And if there were K-pop stars…

Eugénie: When you look at the shows, not in the front row, but the second and third rows, they are *all* filming. The more important you are, the nearer the front you are, the less you film. When you see stories on Instagram, there are always heads in front of the person filming. I think there are so many people filming, for their jobs and also for their own social media.

Over the last 10 years, we've seen the rise of street style. It's revolutionized the industry in a way. It has taken the runway show outside, starting with stylish people wearing their own clothes. What are your thoughts on this phenomenon?

Eugénie: It used to be a bit shameful to hang out with street-style photographers, to be 'street-styled'. But today everyone, even without showing it, they all need it, there is at least an acknowledgement of it. When you get to a show, you shouldn't stop and pose, you have to just walk in, but if you get photographed then you know that you've been validated, in a way. Don't you think? For me I see it as a bit of a competition between the women attending the shows. Maybe not so much with the journalists, but outside the shows it is crazily competitive. People are desperate to be photographed.

Loïc: I remember a Phoebe Philo Céline show at the Tennis Club de Paris, where traffic was brought to a standstill because of this veritable wall of photographers…

Eugénie: People like Bill Cunningham…

Loïc: Oh, I miss seeing Bill so much!

Eugénie: For me, street style was great before, because it was something that was spontaneous, like in Phil Oh's photos – you don't pose, you walk past and if he shoots you, that's cool. Today I think there are loads people who are photographed outside who don't even have an invite. Before it was totally organic and now it's completely calculated. On the business side, what works today is the influencers who are street-styled and then repost the photo on their platforms and tag what they are wearing.

At the most recent Jacquemus show, *Le Raphia*, there was a media entrance and an influencer entrance. So basically, an entrance for the people to be photographed and an entrance for the people not to be!

Eugénie: Well, when you're an influencer you know what's in the contract: you are dressed by the brand, you attend, you are photographed, you post your content.

Loïc: To me the apex of the madness outside the shows was last June at Celine – the menswear at the Palais de Tokyo – I think there were 20,000 people outside. They knew everyone's names, all the fans outside were screaming all the attendees' names.

Eugénie: I think that's great.

Loïc: Well, it was great, but it was also a bit overwhelming.

Eugénie: Yes, but they're real fans of these superstars. I do think it's a bit of shame though, like they know the names of some influencers and have no idea who the real fashion insiders are, who have been around forever. That's a bit of a shame.

Loïc: I think it adds to it.

Eugénie: I don't know; they're there to see the stars who go in but don't really care about the show.

'I wouldn't wish those big designer jobs on anyone. The amount of work, the pressure... Look at Olivier at Balmain; he never has a single Sunday off!'

Loïc: At the last Rick Owens show, [street-style photographer] Tommy Ton didn't even go inside the show, and when I came out afterwards, he described the show to me in detail and had actually even had a better view than me. He was still just as passionate without having been inside.

Though you are both imagemakers and storytellers, I imagine you are also watching data with figures like page views, likes, and other KPI's on a daily basis. So, when it comes to Paris Fashion Week, what performs best?

Loïc: We are in this incredible paradox of analytics. When I release content today, I know which country it works in, I know the average age of the people who watch it, and whether they are men or women. The amount of information I have about my audience is nuts. But the actual control I have over whether a video I make will perform or not is zero. Zero. I did some K-pop-focused videos that had tens of million views on YouTube, but then got fewer than 1,000 views on TikTok. There is no single recipe, that just doesn't exist. Every time, you just have to do decent quality content, because if something works and it's crap, that's all anyone will remember you for! So, it always has to be your most honest work. It has to be honest.

Eugénie: You can't change anything on YouTube, but what is great about writing on the internet is that you can edit it as much as you like. What works for us in terms of Paris – and I find this really annoying and am trying to change it – is always *la parisienne*, her beauty secrets and so on. We're trying to change by shifting the image of the typical Parisienne. It could be other women from different backgrounds, people who also come from the countryside, who have moved to Paris, and they might not have smooth, long, straight hair. We can't kid ourselves, those 'Parisienne' profiles are the stories that get clicks. Everything that is on trend: how to dress, this pair of trousers worn by so and so, and the denim *du jour*. Food works pretty well too, like where to eat the best *jambon beurre* sandwich in Paris. So, ultimately what works about Paris is all the clichés. With our international audiences, as soon as you put anything online about life in Paris or the Parisienne, they just love that image.

Looking back over the past decade or so, I would like to know what some of your favourite moments have been at the Paris shows. For me, one that I will always remember is the first Dior haute-couture show by Raf Simons, when we went into those four rooms with walls of coloured flowers. All the designers were in the front row – Alber Elbaz, Azzedine Alaïa, everyone was there. It was truly incredible.

Eugénie: For me, it has to be my first ever show, when I was working with Fiona. At the end of the internship, she gave me a ticket for Marc Jacobs' Autumn/Winter 2011 Louis Vuitton show with the elevators, where Kate Moss came out on the runway with her lit cigarette. Of course, I arrived super early because I thought they started on time! The atmosphere was insane; it was crazy. I had goosebumps the entire way through. It was my first one and I felt so lucky to be there. Philip Glass had done the music; it was just so beautiful.

And Loïc, you spent a lot of time with Karl, didn't you?

Loïc: Yes, so his last Chanel haute-couture show and his final ready-to-wear, too, and the very first one by Virginie Viard, they were very intense moments. It was crazy. It was the end of one world and the team carried on and took the baton. It was very intense. Then there was the moment when Virgil started at Vuitton, that was totally magical, too. With the rainbow. That production was incredible. So was the Balenciaga show for Spring 2019, when they made the video tunnel. I really loved the final Marc Jacobs show for Vuitton in 2013, when he put Édith Piaf on for the entire show, and everyone was crying.

Eugénie: For me a show is good is when I get shivers down the spine.

Loïc: Or when you don't understand it or when it annoys you.

Eugénie: The worst, in fact, are those when you don't care.

Loïc: No, the worst is when you've already seen it, when it's recycled Balenciaga or Jacquemus. I hate that.

Eugénie: I do have fun looking out for the direct inspirations.

Loïc: The Coperni show with the spray-on dress was a real moment, too.

Eugénie: It was a moment, but then the moment eclipsed the clothes. I don't remember any other clothes before Bella's dress. And I wear their clothes; I can actually afford them. And Courrèges.

Loïc: Oh yes, the Courrèges show was excellent, with those huge sonic booms!

Last summer, in the Bois de Vincennes?

Loïc: He did it three times, the swine! It was so early in the morning, I literally jumped out of my skin. Then when he did the one with the hourglass, the sand pouring down, that one made me so sad; I was so depressed.

Eugénie: Why?

Loïc: I just saw all these young women walking around this sandy hole, and I could only think about death, and deaths in my family and how these beautiful girls were going to die and how fashion is just going around and around in circles. And it's the DNA of the house, he said, we are going around in circles; it's Courrèges, we can't move away from that. That show traumatized me. It was beautiful, but it was traumatizing. Virgil's first for Vuitton really affected me, too. We really only got to see such a small percentage of what he could do.

We've lost a lot of major designers over the last few years. If we think about 2013, we still had Vivienne Westwood, Karl Lagerfeld, Alber Elbaz, Sonia Rykiel, Thierry Mugler, Azzedine Alaïa.

Loïc: I was really affected by the passing of Sonia Rykiel. For me, she really embodied Paris fashion and the Parisienne. That mischievousness. She was politically aware, too.

Eugénie: It really was ready-to-wear in the sense that it was so easy to wear. You could really wear it. One thing that's rather beautiful after her death was the inauguration of the street in the seventh *arrondissement*, Allée Sonia Rykiel. On Boulevard Raspail.

Loïc: And Virgil, can you imagine?

What are your feelings about the idea of houses that have been taken over since the designers died or retired. It's a completely different scenario – I don't think it's the same as Pharrell taking over at Vuitton – and that is going to happen a lot more in the future.

Eugénie: I don't think we know what's going to happen with the big houses but that is a strategy that goes back to the groups…

Do you think your audiences hold onto the names of those designers as much as before?

Eugénie: I don't think so. What the readers want is a product that's cool, and is maybe worn by Rihanna, but not necessarily made by Rihanna. Look at the success of Ludovic de Saint Sernin; his success comes from having been worn by lots of celebrities. To begin with no one had heard of him. He wasn't a star; he came out of nowhere. Jacquemus was the same.

Loïc: But they make products that have personality, and there's real value in that.

Eugénie: And the success of Virgil, who was a bit more of a star, that happened because he embodied his thing, and did something that had never been done before at Vuitton menswear. He did his thing – it was his vision.

To sum up, today, we have Chanel, Givenchy, Dior, real houses with a capital H that have much more weight than the names Gabrielle, Hubert or Christian. Will that happen with these young talents one day?

Loïc: Vuitton is worth €21 billion today; 10 years ago it wasn't €21 billion.

Eugénie: I think for me you have the vision of LVMH and Kering, but I think today Bottega is working well, and Matthieu [Blazy] wasn't very well known before being appointed.

You mean the internal strategies at these groups?

Eugénie: Yes. I don't think the house of Chanel would put a celebrity at the head of Chanel. I don't think so. But you never know, in the end. At Hermès, that's out of the question, and yet they are rocketing even though not very many people know who Nadège [Vanhee-Cybulski] is.

It's more about the continuity of the brand.

Eugénie: It's the brand image, and they continue to put their prices up. They have an excellent strategy and don't need that star-ification. I don't think they will ever take on a huge name…

I get the feeling that since the pandemic, the whole idea of sustainability has been swept aside…

Eugénie: Really? No, I think the young designers are all talking about sustainability a lot. Maybe we don't even need to talk about it, because they're all just doing it, like it's becoming the DNA of their brands. They're working on being sustainable, not greenwashing.

Loïc: Rick Owens, too; at the last show, 90% of his show text explained where all the materials came from.

Eugénie: I think for these people, they don't talk about sustainability any more, because it has become normal.

Loïc: The head of a really big house told me recently that none of its clients today ask about it. But we know that with their daughters, it won't even be a question: if the standards aren't met, they simply

'What works for *Vogue* in terms of Paris – it's really annoying and I'm trying to change it – is always *la parisienne*, her beauty secrets and so on.'

'What's cool about the Paris shows is that even though the big groups might seem to have this monopoly, they still don't monopolize the excitement.'

won't buy that brand. I get the feeling, if you are reasonable today in a house, you are changing the production from A to Z. It's a whole system, it won't happen overnight; it will take at least ten years.

We've known the Paris fashion calendar inside out for more than ten years – this crescendo, this up and down of shows at specific times on specific days. If everything was completely different and moved around, would it make a difference? Would that be a good thing?

Eugénie: It has changed quite a lot already. I feel the fact that Vuitton no longer closes the week, that's changed things.

Loïc: There is an importance in the organization, with Chanel at 10.30am on the Tuesday…

Eugénie: And it's not the same because we're not at the Grand Palais either; that's weird, too. Balenciaga in the centre of Paris this season was very odd.

Loïc: Underneath the Louvre, yes. Jacquemus has changed that a lot, too, by not being in calendar and by also changing who sits in the front row. They're not the same faces in the front row. He's shown you can do one of the most important shows of the year by not adhering to the system.

We also get to see quite incredible places in Paris, and that's all part of it. Speaking of Victoria Beckham again, and her shows at the Val-de-Grâce,[5] for example.

Loïc: Yes, but we were all sitting on people's gravestones! Someone should tell her that's not good karma. I was sitting on someone who had died of tuberculosis!

Eugénie: Have you ever been to the museum upstairs? There are all these preserved foetuses.

Loïc: *Quelle horreur!*

Eugénie: But the space is beautiful.

We have seen shows in churches, art foundations, crypts.

Eugénie: Gay saunas! Le Dépôt for Vetements, that was crazy when we went there [in 2015].

Loïc: UNESCO. All over the Louvre.

Eugénie: The Canal Saint Martin. The Communist Party headquarters.

We've been on boats, to Les Invalides.

Loïc: The Observatoire.

So, what's next for the system?

Eugénie: I think there's a lot of positive change in our industry.

Loïc: What does worry me is revenues that are becoming more and more like *Star Wars*; I think it's like the US, where there is such a monopoly. I get the impression that our friends, the big houses, produce so many handbags now that if you want to make bags as a young designer, all the manufacturers, all the cows, everything has already been used up by these huge companies. What's cool is that even though the big groups might seem to have this monopoly, they still don't monopolize the excitement. I was just as excited by young talents like Jeanne Friot this season as I was by some of the big names.

Eugénie: I just hope that the young designers today can one day find the glory they deserve. I hope they don't just rely on Instagram; I hope that some of these young designers will take the helm of a big brand one day.

For the roulette wheel to continue spinning.

Loïc: I wouldn't wish those jobs on anyone! Anything over €5 billion, anything over €1 billion, the amount of work, the pressure… Look at Olivier at Balmain; he never has a single Sunday off!

Eugénie: Yes, but it's his life; he loves it. What I mean is that I hope it's these young *designers* who get the positions at the big houses and not just celebrities.

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1. French industrialist and media baron Vincent Bolloré runs a business empire in over 100 countries that includes logistics, maritime freight and transport (notably in Africa), advertising (Havas), agriculture (palm oil in Africa and wine in France), print media (free newspaper CNews), and thanks to his controlling share in Vivendi, music and television (Universal Music Group, and TV stations, C8, CNews and Canal+). Bolloré is known for his conservative beliefs, and has been accused of influencing the editorial line of his media companies. CNews, for example, has given populist journalist and presidential candidate Éric Zemmour a regular platform, while in 2021, C8 broadcast US anti-abortion film, *Unplanned* (although only 304,000 people watched it).

2. From its creation in 1984 until the early 2010s and its takeover by Vincent Bolloré in 2015, Canal+ was seen as the least conventional and freest French network. TF1 was originally a mainstream public broadcaster; privatized in 1987, it is now controlled by construction and media giant Bouygues.

3. On 28 February 2020, as Covid was rapidly spreading across the globe, Loïc Prigent's team filmed Carla Bruni, model, singer and wife of ex-French president Nicolas Sarkozy, meeting then-CEO of LVMH, Sidney Toledano, at a Celine show during Paris Fashion Week. 'We can kiss on the cheek, it's crazy,' she said, laughing. 'Because we're old school. We're not scared of anything. We're not feminists; we're not scared of coronavirus.' She then pretended to cough on a number of guests. She later apologized, explaining that it was 'a joke in bad taste to amuse the gallery'.

4. Francesca Ragazzi is now head of editorial content for *Vogue* Italia.

5. Val-de-Grâce was founded as an abbey in the late 1660s, with a church designd by François Mansart, and during the French Revolution was transformed into a military hospital, which it remained until 2016. It was here that Yves Saint Laurent was interned after the nervous breakdown that followed his call-up into the French army in 1960.

Tyler Mitchell & Ferdinando Verderi

Interview by Thomas Lenthal

‘I came into this industry post-iPhone and almost post-Instagram, so for me the democratization of image-making and its contradictions – the challenges to authorship, to value, to prestige and to authenticity – all inform my work.’

Of the two unprecedented challenges for image-makers in the last decade, one could be seen coming: the explosion of visual content in a world where everyone possesses a high-quality camera on their phone, the tools to edit images, and the platforms to publish them, instantly, to a global audience. The other was as unexpected as it was far-reaching: a mass reappraisal of what images (and image-makers) represent, and the arrival of identity politics in the realm of fashion. That the industry has thrived in this era of change, producing some of its most exciting and provocative work to date, is testament to the individuals who met this moment.

At the forefront of contemporary fashion image-making, American photographer Tyler Mitchell and Italian art director Ferdinando 'Ferdi' Verderi share an uncanny ability to navigate this new landscape, deftly balancing brand communications with an innate sensitivity for the issues of the day. Now near ubiquitous, Mitchell was just 23 when in 2018 he stepped into the spotlight to shoot Beyoncé for the cover of American *Vogue*'s September issue, making him the first Black photographer to produce the iconic magazine's lead story. Originally a filmmaker, his eye for narrative and a rich colour palette draws out a deep sense of character from his subjects, including models, friends and celebrities from Harry Styles to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. What has become a signature feeling of tenderness is equally evident in the commerical campaigns he's shot for the likes of Loewe, Gucci, Moncler, Ferragamo, JW Anderson and Marc Jacobs, as well as in his 2022 Gagosian show *Chrysalis*, and his aptly titled, bestselling 2020 monograph *I Can Make You Feel Good*. Meanwhile, as creative director of Italian *Vogue* since 2019, Verderi has made waves fusing social awareness with concept-driven art direction: an entirely illustrated issue of the magazine as an ecological statement; a blank cover to mark the darkest days of the pandemic; and a youth issue featuring drawings by children under nine. Backed by intense, philosophical considerations, Verderi's work almost magically maintains a lightness of touch sought after by brands including Prada, Versace and Adidas Originals.

Both Mitchell and Verderi have a longstanding attachment to New York, the city each calls home, yet both were on the road, travelling for work, when they spoke to *System* about algorithms, the new geography of fashion, and the enduring appeal of the in-person experience.

> **'I remember finding this Harley Weir shoot of Young Thug on Tumblr. That was the springboard for me to understand what types of images resonate.'**

Paris and London,
24 April 2023

Thomas Lenthal: How do you feel about creating fashion imagery in an era defined by Instagram and the democratization of image-making?

Ferdinando Verderi: When I first met Tyler, in about 2015, we were arriving in fashion after this revolution had taken place. I came into this industry post-iPhone and maybe even post-Instagram and, for me, the energy brought by the democratization of image-making and its contradictions, such as the challenges to authorship or value or prestige or authenticity, is very interesting, and I think informs my work. It is hard to be nostalgic, because neither of us was around before, but we hear a lot of interesting stories about how things were different. In fact, Tyler's generation now often tries to bring back shooting on film and, in a way, the processes of pre-Instagram.

Tyler Mitchell: We met some years ago when I was starting out, just doing some small magazine projects. I was a film student making little music videos with artists, some known, others not. I didn't have artists in my family; I hadn't had any exposure to art in a fine-art context or a creative-fashion context. I am of a Tumblr generation of artists. Instagram has now transformed into a sort of Tumblr, but Tumblr then was a swathe of images that came to you in a decontextualized way, and I remember finding this shoot that Harley Weir did of Young Thug, a rapper from Atlanta, where I'm from. I really think that was the springboard for me to understand what types of images resonate.

This incredible source of images is what informs you visually, but when everyone has become a photographer through an iPhone, how do you personally look to stand out? What creates the distinction between you as a professional photographer and anyone with an iPhone?

Tyler: 'Distinction' is an important word. It is weird; I don't think I am better than the average iPhone photographer, but I guess what creates distinction for me is really narrative. That is what matters the most. That's why Ferdi is so great, because he has a distinct sense for ideas and concepts and how they will stand out and distinguish themselves from the rest of what is going on visually. I have chosen to focus on specific forms of casting in my art and fashion work. I talk about where it is I come from and how that informs the work I make: Atlanta, Georgia, and being a young Black image-maker in this contemporary world and what that really means.

Ferdinando: A story just came to mind. When Tyler came to my office, I was seeing a lot of young photographers, and he came in and had this project for Marc Jacobs. What really impressed me was that he had created this need for his images; he had invented a context in which his images made perfect sense. I don't remember the exact mechanics, but I was really impressed by how he distinguished himself from the sea of photography out there by creating a context for himself, a sort of commercial context that wasn't even requested, but which sort of legitimized the effort. I found that incredibly smart. Somehow, even with two images that look the same, I believe the intention behind them can be felt, whether through the context or through the energy that the image-makers place into it. You wanted to have a conversation on a commercial level, at a place that was at that time, and maybe still is, somewhere where images are taken seriously. That was very distinctive.

Tyler: Yes, I remember that project because fashion was so foreign to me; I was boldly naive, in a way. The collection that Marc made was an homage to eighties and nineties New York City and the clothes were essentially rap clothes. It was a womenswear collection, but I was interested in casting my own community and putting men in the clothes. I didn't even realize that that was some sort of transgression, but when I started proposing to stylists that we shoot men in women's clothes, that was a real problem for some people! I was really invested in, like, why is that an issue? I am attracted to feminine things as much as I am to masculine things. For me, it wasn't even a conversation about gender; it was just how these clothes spoke to me. I was thinking about Jamel Shabazz images, and the way New York looked in the eighties and nineties, and I was basically finding kids in my neighbourhood, Flatbush in Brooklyn. It was atypical, as well, because I somehow convinced them to cut me loose with a bag of clothes and not give me any direction.

What do you think fashion clients want from imagery today? Do they even know what they're looking for? What role does photography now play in the world of a brand?

Ferdinando: Personally, I try to shift the conversation away from images and towards meaning, because I think images are the expression of something. It is very hard to discuss images with words; it is almost unfair to images to discuss them with words. If you ask me what a client is looking for, what the industry is looking for, it is something greater than any image can be. That 'something' needs to transcend an image, to liberate the image from the weight of being *the* solution. I think of the image as the expression of something greater than itself.

> **'I try to shift the conversation away from images and towards meaning, because the industry is looking for something greater than any image can be.'**

Do you articulate that for your client? Seldom does a client come up with a clear notion of what they are about. In my experience, it can feel like clients sometimes do not really understand what it is they are trying to say.

Ferdinando: I think they know in their own words and in their own perspective, as much as I know from my own perspective what I am about. It always helps to have a completely different perspective on ourselves. Identity is not an objective, or a finite, or a timeless issue. There is always in my mind a conversation between myself, the people creating the 'now' of a brand, and this silent conversation partner: the people who made the history of that brand, decades or a hundred years ago. The energy that the initiative had at the beginning is always a silent partner in this triangulation – that founding energy. I think it is the responsibility of someone who does what we do to recontextualize that everyday. Every project has its own mix of present and past – and for me, that past is always present.

What is your experience of client conversations, Tyler? What are you interested in when trying to understand the client's expectations? Are they often unclear?

Tyler: [Laughs] I'm laughing because I think Ferdi is much more knowledgeable about the inner workings of these conversations than I am. As a photographer, you know, in the last half decade we have really emerged into a fashion scene after this image-making revolution, and we are of that moment. There's been a different kind of hunger for images, not just in terms of volume, but quality, and in terms of storytelling and authorship. My experience with fashion clients has been so wonderful, and I'm not saying that in a trite way; I really mean it. What people seem to look for in me is closely tied to a narrative that interests me; they are interested in the characters and the context that I seem to create, whether in my personal work or commercial projects, and they seem to want to lean into that in some way or another. I'm not saying they all want the same thing, because brands are individually different and as an artist I'm sometimes speaking many different languages in my work. But my work with clients in the fashion world is interrelated with my interests, not divorced from them. The images I'm being asked to create usually feed me as a human, if that makes sense. I'm usually connecting with casting I like or photographing someone who inspires and engages me; maybe the hair is really speaking to me and where I came from or the styling is something I love. I have really had the fortunate experience of having clients approach me with what I do in mind.

Ferdinando: Going back to the previous question about the ubiquity of images, that's something that arguably leads to seeing a lot of images that look the same, which makes who took them even more important. The story of the author becomes part of the image itself; that authenticity of why someone took it is part of making the image, of assessing the quality of an image. This, I think, is one of the ways that today images mean more than how they look – there is a story behind them. That has always been the case, but photography used to be almost like an elite skill, in the sense that you had to train and understand the medium to have a point of view. You always knew who took a photograph because its style had been developed by an individual, and it was arguably wrong to emulate it. When it was, people would notice. So you had these masters of style who had their own language, but today, when an image is important it gets suddenly multiplied by the community out there – and there is nothing wrong with that.

Tyler: That really makes me think about the potential future importance of abandoning the use of style as a crutch, which is why I continue to embrace narrative. It doesn't bother me so much if an artist has 20 different styles, as long as that language and context weave together to make sense.

Ferdinando: More than just working together, Tyler and I have actually been speaking a lot about things. There was this one experiment we did together that was geared towards something we had been speaking about for a while; this idea of developing Tyler's photography in a non-linear narrative. In order to develop an experiment like that, you need a lot of space and a complete lack of pressure. During the summer of 2021, we did the digital issue of Italian *Vogue* where I asked Tyler to do a non-linear visual essay about what was happening in the world, which was very heavy stuff. I then asked our friend [playwright] Jeremy O. Harris to write a non-linear text that would do the same thing, but I didn't allow them to look at the other's work, so that the two essays would clash in the magazine and I would lay them out in ways that were almost like a cacophony. The idea was that there was something important going on in the world, we needed Tyler's voice on it, and Tyler's most distinctive and meaningful voice would emerge from something that wasn't under pressure to feel like a linear story. We are both interested in that sort of freedom.

Tyler: Exactly. I remember our conversations during that summer, and it was wonderful because there is a lot of pressure on photographers to do one kind of thing, and it was amazing to be given that space. That is one of my favourite stories, I think. When an artist can work in that way and doesn't feel restrained and tied down, it just gets more interesting.

Talking of *Vogue*, you've both worked with and had significant moments of success associated with the *Vogue* brand. What does it represent today as a vehicle for fashion imagery, and how has it evolved over the past decade?

Tyler: It has really been – and continues to be – such an educational and amazing ride making work with *Vogue*. It's an institution to be interpreted – the brand name will always be there – and it is wonderful what not only Anna, but the whole lineage of editors has built. Each editor, creative director, like Ferdi, or photographer who comes into the institution's history has something to add, remix, and play with, so I feel like my role in that history was to inject something new and fresh. I feel like I did that and in collaboration with Ferdi, we did it in an especially radical way.

Ferdinando: Yes, the beauty of *Vogue* is really its function, which is also what people sometimes have a hard time accepting. *Vogue* is trying to be this relentless defender of the influence of fashion as an industry, and I think that comes with certain things. My *Vogue* experience has been incredibly positive, which has a lot to do with the DNA of the *Vogue* brand, with its calling to be the face of the industry to the world. All my work there has been trying to bring to life that conversation, and obviously Italian *Vogue* within the *Vogue* family has its own DNA.

Tyler: I've got to say, Ferdi is speaking too little of himself, because we have to put it into context. I mean, he came in there and shook shit up! Just the sheer scale of projects that Ferdi was doing… That is what I mean about *Vogue* being this amazing institution to interpret and remix and play with. He was doing things like play with the idea of what an Italian *Vogue* cover could even be, whether it was making the cover entirely blank or entirely maximal, or 100 covers or one distinctive cover – just playing with the format. He is absolutely part of this conversation, too. I think it's fun when you get to shake up an institution as an artist.

Ferdinando: Yes, definitely. There was a great tension between the *Vogue* brand and what we were doing, but it is part of *Vogue*'s calling to speak to the world, to try to connect. Those two Covid years were very important. There was massive energy around inclusivity going on around the world that I felt offered *Vogue* amazing responsibility to try to make a difference. We talk about images, we talk about words, but I also like to talk about actions – and what I feel I was trying to do with *Vogue* were actions. 'Action' implies some risk taking, and I think people really respond to courage. Doing a blank cover is not only an aesthetic idea or a minimal idea, but it is also an action. It is about challenging the whole idea of the image, or words, in our communication. I genuinely thought those ideas were an expression of the values of the *Vogue* brand, which is why I felt comfortable pushing it so far.

Ferdi, as an Italian who has been based, and continues to work, in New York, do you sense a natural distinction between European and American fashion-imagery sensibilities?

Ferdinando: I think this discrepancy has really been resolved. This system of in-person communication that was making each city its own world, those differences have gone, especially in the half decade since Tyler and I started working. The internet has redefined the geography of image-making, and actual physical proximity to things doesn't really matter. However, there is a real energy in New York that I respect and it's that energy that brought me and Tyler together, in the way that New York really encourages newness. That energy is really hard to emulate. I don't think it translates into image-making, but I think it translates into an attitude of accepting new things. Arguably, in a different decade, London had even more of that. Tyler, what do you think? As a New Yorker?

Tyler: This is now my tenth year in New York, and I have some clear loyalty; I've travelled the world, but New York still feels like the place where my heart is, creatively. It's where I am most rooted; it is the place where my eyes opened up. I went to university at NYU, and I was only studying film but my whole transformation into becoming a photographer happened there. Once that happened, I felt more comfortable making work in Europe and other parts of the globe, but there is nothing quite like the recipe that New York has. You know, like being able to bop to a bookstore and chat with my girl Miwa [Susuda] at Dashwood Books, and then run into so-and-so on the street and have a conversation about something you may or may not end up doing together collaboratively. You know, these serendipitous things happen in New York. Now, in terms of the geography of image-making in a wider sense, it is weird because when you look at my work geographically, it is not New York City at all. It is quite rural; it is very natural and nature oriented. Why is that, if New York City is my creative inspiration? As a young photographer, I'm actually interested in making work that's not so caught up in the rat race of contemporary society, this obsession with technology and being in a metropolis. I'm interested more in making pictures of humans in connection and community, and connectivity with nature and with each other.

Ferdinando: This is an anecdote that

> **'I don't think I'm better than the average iPhone photographer, but I guess what creates distinction for me is narrative; that is what matters the most.'**

> **'The ubiquity of images leads to a lot of them looking the same, which makes who took them even more important. The author is part of the image.'**

I think is very New York. Jimmy Moffat, Steven Meisel’s agent, said to me, ‘I am pairing mentors and new photographers, and I would love to pair you with Tyler Mitchell. Would you be his mentor?’ And I said, ‘Of course.’ Then I met Tyler, and a few days later he called me and said, ‘I have to tell you as a mentor something very confidential: I have been asked to shoot the American *Vogue* cover!’ That whole moment in Tyler’s career – being considered both as emerging and already at this beacon of the establishment – is emblematic of New York’s way of perceiving things.

What are the metrics of success when you create fashion imagery for brands today? Indeed, do you find that the reliance on digital stats is affecting brand equity and creative impulses?

> **‘My work for fashion clients is interrelated with my interests, not divorced from them. The images I’m asked to create usually feed me as a human.’**

Ferdinando: Some of the characteristics that the algorithms do not reward are certainly what, at some point before, would have made us stop and look at something, but on the other hand, each context has its own rules and its own beauty. When we are operating with these algorithms, it is an interesting challenge to involve your creativity to perform to these metrics. Often things can be made better by these metrics. The problem starts when you forget the context and think of the metrics as rules for creativity as a whole. That is a big dilemma for everyone, because some of the things that we naturally love are outliers that don’t fit to a standard. But every time there is a rule, there is room for new disobedience, and that creates new energy.

Do you get feedback from your clients?

Ferdinando: Yes, of course, but I think that there has always been a type of feedback. Before it was probably word-of-mouth feedback, and now it comes with measurements, but I don’t think it is anything new. I think it just evolved; the metrics evolved.

This technology to measure success is available, but fashion clients, specifically the types of clients that you guys work with, don’t seem to be using it. It is almost like things haven’t really evolved and it is still all about word of mouth.

Ferdinando: The awareness of these metrics reframes the conversation. Everyone we talk to is very progressive; everyone embraces the reality of the world we live in. I am really proud of our response to this sort of 360 engagement in ideas, like the fact that someone could take a picture of a flower and send it to their friends and that picture will be more important to them than a picture shot for a magazine of the same thing. I am really fascinated by what makes this engagement thrive, and finding ways to use it that are still a pure expression of the brand. I am not nostalgic for a time in which there were fewer rules.

In fashion, the notion of celebrity has evolved over the past decade, from a slightly peripheral, sometimes uncool side dish to becoming arguably *the* core component in presenting the fashion dream. What are your thoughts on this, and how do you approach celebrity as an ingredient in your image-making?

Tyler: I don’t know if I am the right person to be answering this because my career and experience is so inextricably tied up with celebrity and Instagramming and algorithms – the three are just a part of how I came to consume and make images. For me, the only thing that I try to be led by when I’m making art is my interest in being in the proximity of people who inspire me. These ‘celebrities’ could be people who are quietly or loudly impacting the culture. They could be the tippy-top of the top – the Beyoncés and Rihannas – down to the artists having a gallery show in my neighbourhood in Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn. Like this amazing young Japanese-Mongolian artist, Arisa Yoshioka, who has just had a show in my neighbourhood. I love her work, she inspires me; I want to be in proximity to her. I would photograph her the same as if she were a celebrity, the same way I would photograph Kanye West, Harry Styles, Beyoncé, Michaela Coel.

Ferdinando: I agree. ‘Celebrities’ are people who have a talent that brings fame. The difference between photographing a celebrity and someone who is not a celebrity is that when you present a celebrity in an image, the audience already knows them. That definitely changes the images; there is less independence than when you are constructing something that exists outside of the context of real life. It is a challenge, but I think there are ways to think about it that are sort of moving the needle forward. I’m wearing this T-shirt that I wear all the time: it’s got a Juergen [Teller] picture of Björk. Arguably the picture has a charge because we all know who she was at the time when he took this picture – her art, her taste, her persona. It raises the complexity of the whole image when the audience knows the person beyond it; it adds another layer.

We are asking a lot of people in the industry two questions regarding Paris Fashion Week: what is your memory of your first-ever show in Paris? And what do you think Paris Fashion Week represents today?

Tyler: My first memory of a show – and it’s an absolutely colossal fashion memory to have – is being snuck into the Comme des Garçons women’s fashion show in 2018. It was right after my cover with Beyoncé had been released. Life was happening very fast for me at that point, and I was in Paris with Carlos Nazario [stylist and global fashion director of *i-D*] and we were talking about collaborating. It was the sunniest day of September on the day of the Comme show, and as Rei Kawakubo is one of the fashion greats, I was like, ‘Oh, I would love to go to the Comme show.’ Carlos was, like, ‘I’ll just bring you in!’ He snuck me in and, somehow, I ended up in the front row. It was the most intimate, amazing show experience. For me, it was transformative, because living in New York, being an American from Atlanta, Georgia, all of this education about fashion came at me very, very fast. I was quite sceptical of it, each step of the way; like, are fashion shows really that important? Why do you need to go and physically be there when you can see the pictures online later? Then you sit in a Comme show and have your mind blown away, and you see exactly how jaw-dropping it is to see the clothes walking in front of you with the music playing.

> **‘When operating with algorithms, it’s an interesting challenge to use your creativity to perform to these metrics. Things can often be made better by them.’**

What about Paris?

Tyler: It’s true that so much design history and culture collides here. I’m currently spending most of my spring and summer here, by accident and on purpose; I just happen to be working here most of the time, but this is also where the action is! That experience of having my socks blown off, seeing these amazing Comme des Garçons designs walk in front of me, that was quite a particular side to Paris Fashion Week, but the other side is to attend these behemoth, spectacular shows. They are wonderful and awe- inspiring, too. Personally, as a photographer I walk away from a fashion-week experience feeling both drained and inspired – like, really, fully inspired. If I sit in my room in New York and try to catch all the stuff on Vogue Runway and think about what images I want to make, I don’t get the same thought patterns and ideas popping out of my brain.

Ferdi?

Ferdinando: With the explosion of this idea of being connected from anywhere, the rare moments of real connection have become indispensable. Paris just happens to have been chosen as the industry’s in-person experience for several logistical reasons. There is a need for it, especially in a world where geographies have been completely redefined and we are OK about talking long distance forever and doing interviews on Zoom. A city bringing everyone together just resolves a lot of human needs for real interaction. Paris is also like a billboard. You know, I can even envisage a sort of shift to where the streets, the stores don’t really represent places to buy, but Paris becomes a massive open-air gallery, with the stores becoming experiences and people buying from their bedrooms. I wonder if going back to a very human scale could even be engineered as a marketing strategy. Paris also represents couture, which is why it maintains a certain uniqueness.

Couture is a sort of embodiment of authority within this: a brand that does it is almost more legit than a brand that doesn’t. For some reason this thing still seems to carry a certain weight in the consumer’s mind. What is your first memory of Paris Fashion Week?

Ferdinando: My first show was about a decade before my second show. It was a Chanel haute-couture show that happened to be on my birthday, 25 January, and I remember even now the melody of the opening track. By Chanel standards, it was quite a private show; it wasn’t one of those massive-scale ones. But the energy was so tangible and so physical, and I remember understanding in that moment all the intangible qualities of experiencing something in person; this sort of next-level, multidimensional physical experience. I started to be a little more careful about judging things without being there, because if you have been in fashion for the past few years, you can get the impression that images online do it all. I remember making a mental note that I hadn’t understood what fashion was until that moment – and that I had better not forget it!

Samira Nasr & Hanya Yanagihara

Interview by Steff Yotka

‘When you work for a general news organization, you’re really aware how much people revile fashion, how stupid and poisonous and irrelevant they think it is. Yet at the same time, they project so much onto the fashion industry. They expect it to reflect what the female body looks like. They expect it to define what a woman looks like. You have this great hostility, but also these great expectations.’

Call it the New York gaze. For over a century, the rapport between American fashion magazines and the Paris shows has been one of the industry's most powerful and enduring dynamics. It's an intercontinental exchange that has long loomed large in the public imagination: when Christian Dior presented his 1947 collection, it was Carmel Snow, editor in chief at *Harper's Bazaar*, who dubbed it the 'New Look', commissioned Richard Avedon to shoot the collection on the Place de la Concorde, and helped transform it into an era-defining sensation. Further mythology came in the form of Stanley Donen's classic 1957 musical romantic comedy *Funny Face*, with Kay Thompson playing Maggie Prescott, the American editor of *Quality* magazine, dispatched to the Paris couture shows with her star photographer Dick Avery (a thinly veiled Avedon, played by Fred Astaire) and street-cast ingénue Jo Stockton played by Audrey Hepburn. And since then, the omnipresent legend of the American 'editrix' – from Diana Vreeland to Anna Wintour – remains a potent symbol of cosmopolitan power and idiosyncrasy.

> **'When *Bazaar* launched in 1867, it was a place where women would go for the issues that caught them, but their world was so small; it really was just fashion.'**

Jump to the present, and another generation of New Yorkers has established a new tone for the American 'glossy'. In 2020, having steadily risen through the ranks of the city's fashion titles, Samira Nasr took the helm at *Harper's Bazaar*. She quickly set to work bringing the USA's longest-established fashion magazine in line with the times, opening up the conversation about what a modern fashion-media brand should be by embracing female empowerment, body positivity, queer perspectives, and diversity, a trait she embodies as the first woman of colour to hold the position. Hanya Yanagihara has been no less transformational: as editor in chief at *T* magazine, she heads up the fashion and style wing of the *New York Times*, bringing the paper's renowned journalistic standards to bear on fashion, design, and culture. Away from *T*, Yanagihara is internationally renowned as one of the most celebrated – and hotly debated – novelists in contemporary US literature (her debut, *A Little Life*, was nominated for both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award in 2015) and, as such, she brings a ruminative authority to the way the magazine now frames Paris Fashion Week. 'Each collection is a proposal for how we might present our future selves,' she wrote of the shows in a recent editor's letter. 'If the clothes are a suggestion, they're also a reflection of recent history and our collective emotional responses to it.' Ultimately, as editors in chief in 2023, Nasr and Yanagihara represent (and are representative of) an updated take – compassionate, engaged, smart, inclusive – on that New York gaze. For *System*'s tenth-anniversary issue, the pair met up in Lower Manhattan in early April, a month after Paris Fashion Week, to discuss solidarity, social media, schedules, and why more people should crash the shows.

New York, 7 April 2023

Steff Yotka: What do you look forward to about Paris Fashion Week?

Samira Nasr: One of the strangest aspects is that it's like camp reunion; you get to see all your friends. I mean, we all live in New York, but because of our schedules, we are never together. Then in the 15 minutes before an Alaïa show, we have this crazy catch-up.

Hanya Yanagihara: There are people I never see except in Paris. My team and I play this game: 'Who're we most excited to see at fashion week? And who do we most dread seeing?' I'm not going to reveal the answer for the second one, but we all had the same answer for the first: Tim Blanks. We all love seeing Tim. And Cathy [Horyn], too; I often wind up sitting next to her. She has the best voice; I could listen to her reading a menu.

Samira: Also, former colleagues. I love getting to see people I have known and loved but who I only get to see at these occasions.

Hanya: The industry has changed so much in terms of tone and attitude over the last five years. It was much more snobbish and clique-ish; now there's a real sense of mutual sympathy – there's less competition and more sharing, especially among the magazine editors. Our creative director at *T*, Patrick Li, has been doing this for something like 60 seasons. How long have you been doing this, Samira? Did you start in the closet and then move up?

Samira: Yes, I was an intern at *Mirabella* and then I went to *New York* with Jane Hobson; she was the fashion director, and we worked out of a conference room. I then went freelance and started assisting Mary Alice Stephenson, before getting a job as a market assistant at *Vogue*. Susi Billingsley was fashion market director and then it was Wendy Hirschberg, and I was her assistant for a few years. Then Grace [Coddington]'s assistant announced she was leaving, and Grace offered me the job, so I did that for two years before going off to *Allure* to work with Polly Mellen and the great Linda Wells.

Hanya: Wow. Is there a women's fashion book in town you *haven't* worked with?

Samira: Let's think about this… I've worked at *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Bazaar*, *InStyle*, *Allure*; I never worked at *W* or *Glamour*. I always wanted to work with Cindi Leive, but never had the good fortune.

Hanya: That's typical of our generation; you just worked everywhere – you did the circuit.

Samira: I was an assistant well into my thirties; we all just worked hard and hoped that it led to the next thing.

> **'It is great to make noise, to remind people of the values that you believe in, but fashion has always struggled to be all things to everyone.'**

Hanya: What was your first European season?

Samira: When I was at *Harper's Bazaar* under Kate Betts, I went to London. But then she got fired and I quit; I mean, did I quit or get fired? Anyways, I went freelance, and that was right before 9/11. We lived through that moment, and when the dust settled that first season, I went to Paris.

Hanya: What was that like?

Samira: It was really gentle because everyone was so scared. As you said before, there are certain moments when we are reminded that we are a community and can rally and be gentle with one another. Of course, I am remembering this through the lens of nostalgia.

Was it the same after the pandemic, and then again when the war started in Ukraine? It feels like we intersect with a global moment of reckoning every season.

Hanya: There's been some major earth-shaking event that breaks in the midst of every season. Whatever show the news breaks at, everyone is, like, 'What are we *doing* here?' Those are moments of awareness: an alert will pop up and everyone discusses it as we wait for the show to begin. Ten years ago, when smartphones weren't so ubiquitous, you were much more likely to remain in a bubble.

Samira: I agree, but I also think that there is much more of an openness. Like, during the shows when the war broke out in Ukraine, I was supposed to host my first party in Paris as editor in chief and I really struggled to do the right thing for the moment. It was comforting to seek out the advice of my peers who have similar values, people who could advise me.

Do you feel like all that has added this layer to the role of editor in chief, where it isn't just about fashion at your magazines? Maybe before it was easier to be in the bubble, and magazines were like havens.

Hanya: Samira, you've done a really great job with this. No one is going to *Bazaar* for news, but you're very good at making cultural themes visually relevant and narratively true.

Samira: I don't want us to be a news mag. I have a wonderful team and we are rooted in a lot of shared values; so we don't do news, but we can do things our way. When *Bazaar* was founded in 1867, it was a place where women would go for the issues that caught them, but their world was so, so small; it really was just fashion. Now our lives have expanded so much, and we need to meet our audience in all these places. When I took over *Bazaar*, I wanted to create something that I didn't think was already out there, to bring in what interests me, which is luxury at the intersection of culture.

Do you think fashion is keeping up with that? Immediately after this season people noted the absence of models of all body types. Two years ago, 79% of collections had a plus-size model and then this season, it was down to 23%…

Samira: It is great to make noise, to remind people of the values that you believe in, but fashion has always struggled to be all things to everyone.

Hanya: It took a very long time for the runways to become more racially diverse. That took years of pressure.

Samira: But they are not even there.

Hanya: It's been incremental changes, and as soon as you take your foot off the pedal, everything slides back. At *T*, we don't cover news because we're part of a news organization; I don't want to dip my toe into news – it would be embarrassing for everyone. When you work for a general news organization, you're really aware how much people revile fashion, how stupid and irrelevant they think it is. Yet at the same time, they project so much onto the fashion industry. They expect it to reflect what the female body looks like. They expect it to define what a woman looks like. You have this great hostility, but also these great expectations.

Fashion is a source of a lot of people's fantasies and insecurities, both; people want it to be traditionally and conventionally beautiful, and at the same time to reflect some utopian society.

It is so true. Is there an issue that fashion *doesn't* touch? It is about celebrity, technology, media, aspiration, womanhood, bodies, entertainment.

Hanya: It's unavoidable. Anyone who thinks they're opting out is fooling themselves. If you wear clothes, you're engaging with the industry.

Samira: If you take a second to consider what you are putting on, you are participating in fashion.

Hanya: What did you love this season?

Samira: In Milan, I loved Ferragamo so much, walking that line between a legacy brand and making it new and speaking to different women at the same time.

Hanya: I wasn't in Milan, but I loved Miu Miu in Paris. We just had our trends meeting on Wednesday and spent so much time discussing it. I also loved Schiaparelli, and not just because I love Daniel [Roseberry] as a person; I thought it was very strong this season. And Loewe, too. Who do you think is the best showman, besides Demna? I think Marc Jacobs always does a great show.

Samira: Prada was great; it was very sensory with the perfume from the flowers.

Hanya: I think Jonathan [Anderson] does good shows. They're lo-fi, but there's a real sense of discipline.

Samira: They are really thoughtful.

Hanya: Very personal, and there's an easy, but real, intellectual quality to them. It's not like someone made it up for him.

There are so many things you can look at in a show – what is it that makes your heart beat?

Hanya: The question we talk about all the time is: is the fashion inseparable from the show? The show has to have *something* to do with the collection. One of the things I loved about Miu Miu is that although the show itself is never that interesting – it's not meant to be a spectacle; the casting is good, but there's that annoying raised runway; I hate the space – there's always a real idea and a real narrative and real characters. I loved the hair. There was wit and a sense of commitment that I thought was well realized and consistent and funny and true. At Saint Laurent, the big shoulders, the early Donna Karan vibe, the references to the sexiness and power of the 1980s – it really worked in that space; there was a logic there. It didn't feel gimmicky – it felt like a monumental show, a big show.

Samira: It is all of those things. I also always look at the models to see if they want to be there, because sometimes they look uncomfortable or in pain. It is everything coming together: the music, the lighting, the set, the mood, but also the women. Does she believe in this? Does she want to be here? Because if she doesn't then I usually have a hard time believing in it.

Are you concerned that Paris Fashion Week is becoming this conglomerate-only endeavour? Is there enough space for emerging designers?

Samira: For every kid who is making something on their bedroom floor or graduating from Saint Martins, no matter where they are from, Paris remains the gold standard. But the industry is really becoming more challenging for young designers.

Hanya: The very young designers bring a sense of legitimacy and street cred, and the team will go see as many of them as possible. They feel duty bound to scout as much as they can.

Samira: There are two editors on my team who are so passionate about emerging designers. You know, it is not impossible to break through, but it is certainly getting harder.

Hanya: But that *is* the promise of these weeks. Ultimately, people are hopeful, and every season they find someone new who reminds them of why they work in fashion. If they weren't optimistic, they'd stop doing it. Although the chaos as you're trying to get into the shows is now so out of hand that it's enough to put you off going.

Samira: Do you think people still crash the doors?

Hanya: Patrick was encouraging some fashion students to crash the Rick Owens show recently.

Samira: I crashed shows.

Hanya: But it's hard to do so now.

It is very hard now. The QR codes, the wrist bands…

Hanya: If brands want things to feel younger and livelier, then they should let the fashion students crash or give them standing room. Celine does that.

Samira: Crashing a fashion show is like a rite of passage!

Hanya: Fashion students have been doing that since the dawn of time.

Samira: Without them, we are dead in the water.

> **'Fashion is a source of people's fantasies and insecurities; people want it to be conventionally beautiful, while also reflecting some utopian society.'**

Hanya: Yes, because who cares more than they do?

I do think we could use a bit of 'you look cool, you can come in without a wristband'. It is really hard to get into a show if you don't have the invite.

Hanya: I think people should be rewarded if they have the energy to crash.

How do you navigate the work and pleasure of Paris Fashion Week? You run magazines, you have these commitments to be at certain shows and take tons of meetings. The schedule is…

Hanya: …too long. Ten days is too long.

Samira: Paris is too long; it should be three days shorter. It is not fair to international press. There are days when there is just one show.

Hanya: I work at night; I don't go to the dinners. I think for a lot of the New Yorkers, there's a whole swing shift after the shows.

Samira: I don't go to sleep before 2am.

Hanya: You have more time in Milan; the city's smaller and easier to navigate, and the schedule just feels more relaxed.

How much do you pay attention to the social-media conversation? How do you navigate the fine line of people loving fashion online and then the other end, people posting terrible things on Twitter every day. There can be so much vitriol.

Hanya: I'm not on Twitter or TikTok.

Samira: I'm not on Twitter either.

So that is the secret!

Samira: Most of my team are, and they will pull me aside and say, 'You should know about this.' But otherwise, no, and I'm not into cancel culture.

Hanya: It's generational. I have a friend who's 37 and taking an Instagram break. For his generation, if you're out having dinner with friends, all everyone is talking about is what's being said on social media. For us, for our generation, we can really opt out. Those of us who are 45 and over are less aware of the conversations in general. That doesn't mean we aren't interested, and one does need to hear about some of it, but if you're 35 and under, you can't escape it.

On Twitter, everything is meme-ified. Now young people are talking about 'quiet luxury', like even the idea of something simple or understated has been commodified as a meme. How did we get to a place where everything is so consumable? Is there an alternative?

Hanya: Like un-meme-ifiable fashion…

Samira: Because everyone has a device, there is so much noise out there, and it is more important than ever for media brands or editors or influencers to help people understand what they are seeing. The fact that everyone has access to fashion makes our jobs more important, because we can contextualize it for them.

Hanya: I really love the *Times* podcast *Popcast*, which is about the business of pop music, and one of the questions that comes up on it is, 'Is music only being made for TikTok now?' The extension of that is: is fashion only making clothes for social media, specifically TikTok? In certain shows, there are these 30-second, perfectly meme-able moments; it may not be a conscious decision, but this is how fashion shows are skewing.

Samira: Yeah, but you also have to acknowledge that with these shows these houses are trying to reach their audience.

Hanya: And they need to reach 13-year-old girls. If they're inspiring a generation of pubescent fashion lovers, that's arguably good for the industry.

Now that a designer is being tasked with doing all the things – the TikTok, and so on – do they need to be less of a maverick?

Samira: I don't think those other things are their job. There are some people who grew up with it, so it is natural for them; it is very natural for Olivier [Rousteing] at Balmain.

Hanya: The age of big personality designers is over; you can't have someone whose bad behaviour is going to torpedo a multi-billion-dollar business. You can't have someone who's colourful… but isn't controllable.

Samira: They have to be more disciplined. Their output is exponentially higher – pre-collections, collections – and *everything* has to be worthy of being broadcast. They don't have time to be colourful and outspoken. Otherwise, it is just not going to be successful.

Hanya: Do you have any good friends who are designers?

Samira: Most of my friends are not in fashion. I am friendly with a lot of designers, and I enjoy their company, but not intimately. The closest friends I have who are designers are Jack and Lazaro [at Proenza Schouler], Adam Lippes, and Rachel Comey. I am friendly with Tory [Burch] and really enjoy

> **'The age of big personality designers is over; you can't have someone whose bad behaviour is going to torpedo a multi-billion-dollar business.'**

seeing her, but not like close friends. In Europe I'm friendly with certain people; we meet for coffee, but we are not super close friends.

Hanya: What do most of your close friends do?

Samira: My friends all do different things. Some are stay-at-home moms, actors, people in Hollywood, creative directors; I have a friend who works closely with Ralph [Lauren]. All sorts of different things; a lot of creatives, but not necessarily directly in fashion. What about you, Hanya?

Hanya: Most of my really close friends are people who are responsible for the care and feeding of creative people. So they own galleries or are agents or editors – they're people who enable creative people to work. I find that to be a very special personality type, a very generous type of person, who understands and is sympathetic to the ebbs and flows of creative life.

> **'There's no other industry where the gap between the perceived glamour of the job and the reality of the job is greater.'**

Hanya, you are close friends with Daniel Roseberry and have been watching him taking on international fame. Have you gleaned anything from that?

Hanya: Yes – that there's no industry where the gap between the perceived glamour of the job and the reality of the job is greater, except perhaps chefs.

Samira: I don't think there is perceived glamour being a chef, like my brother. They just work really hard. But I agree, everyone thinks the life of a designer is glamorous.

Hanya: It's four weeks of glamour if you're doing couture, too. Otherwise, it's 48 weeks in a studio on your own.

Samira: The pressure that these designers live with, I just can't imagine it; I could never do it.

Hanya: And the feeling that you have to creatively one-up yourself every season, *and* it has to work from a sales perspective. It just has to be better and better, more and more, season after season.

Samira: They don't even have to generate millions now, but *billions*. That is why I really leave the shows wanting to be as supportive of all of those people as I can be. They work so hard and there are all the people in their ateliers, too. For someone to tear it apart in two sentences is really harsh.

Hanya: I completely agree.

Samira: Someone said to me recently: 'You just love everything.' But I actually do! And I want to support the smaller designers as best I can, and this industry that has given me so much. I'm always thinking, 'these are my people, this is my community', and about how I can support it. We need everyone at the table, we really do. It breaks my heart when the critics are unkind.

Hanya: On occasion there are shows where you can tell that they didn't try at all, and it feels cheap and cynical – but those are the exception. Even if it's something that you don't like, *someone* sweated over it and fought for it. You can't trash those shows; they represent someone's hopes and toil and dreams. One of the ideas that the outside world has is that designers are particular and snobby, and that they're cynical. But most of them are actually romantics; they're trying to communicate something. They're trying to say something in a visual language, and they have to get it right season after season. They can't just say: 'I'm not feeling creatively inspired this season, I'll sit this one out.' Other artists wait for inspiration because they can.

What are your hopes for the future of fashion and the future of fashion week?

Hanya: I love being at the live shows; I hated those virtual shows, although I know everyone tried their best. I love the spectacle of the show; I love that so much money goes into 20 minutes. I love that it's ephemeral. There's no other good way to capture it: you really have to *be* there, to see things move and sense the excitement of the room – it's the ultimate ticket. Anything live is precious and rare, and anything theatrical is inherently exciting. So despite the annoying aspects, the show itself is always exciting; something could always go really wrong, but something could also go very right.

Samira: I still pinch myself that I get to go to these things. I agree with you: any show is a remarkable experience. I feel very lucky. There is so much ugliness in the world right now, in acts, in words, in gestures, that I look to fashion to provide a counter to that; I look to fashion for beauty.

Hanya: In a single season you can see designers grappling with the outside world in different ways, and interpreting it differently, and that's fascinating.

So, we got Samira's full story about her entrée into fashion, but we didn't get yours, Hanya…

Hanya: I'm just a visitor here.

Samira: No, you are here to stay.

Hanya: People are very nice to the visitors.

Samira: You are not a fucking visitor!

Hanya: I'm an accidental tourist in fashion, and I really love it. When people know that you're ignorant, they're actually very nice. It's when you pretend to know everything that they start getting suspicious. *T* is not strictly a fashion magazine – about 30% of our revenue comes from the design industry. I was really lucky when I got this job because there was a great fashion team already in place, and they taught me everything I needed to know. I started in May of 2017, and that first season, I was dazzled and overwhelmed. Now, I'm excited at the beginning [of Paris], but by Japan day I'm usually having a nervous breakdown. In Milan, I feel fine – it's fast.

Yes, and there is pasta.

Hanya: There's pasta, and it's smaller.

You are both here to stay.

Samira: Yes, and every year is a gift.

Hanya: That's a good ending. Every year is a gift.

Imran Amed & Luca Solca

Interview by Jonathan Wingfield

‘The ability for smaller players to compete with brands like Vuitton, Hermès and Chanel is now *very* limited. The barriers to entry have become so high. Not just in terms of the investment, but also because the big groups control all the retail space and advertising placement, as well as all the talent. They control the whole ecosystem; they have a lock on it.’

In the mid-2000s, a young McKinsey management consultant named Imran Amed was thinking of ways to bring together his burgeoning professional career with his personal love of fashion. As an eight-year-old kid growing up in Calgary, Amed had begun watching an exuberant journalist called Tim Blanks present the Canadian TV show *Fashion File*. 'I probably should have been watching cartoons,' says Amed today, 'but through that show Tim opened a window to a world I'd obviously never seen – Paris, Milan, New York – and a community of people who seemed different, *other*, but were kind of celebrated, or at least accepted for being so.'

By 2006, now a Harvard Business School graduate, Amed had relocated to London for McKinsey, but was trying – with little success – to network his way into fashion's rapidly expanding global industry. ('One executive from a major luxury group just looked me in the eye and said, "Imran, we don't need you in this industry."') If management wasn't convinced by what Amed's analytical eye could offer, an alternative route came through the nascent blogging world. He started a Typepad site in his free time in 2007, named it the Business of Fashion, and began sharing links to online stories and writing posts that offered a fresh and, crucially, global perspective on the fashion industry. 'It just so happened that I started writing at the very early stages of the social-media earthquake that changed the way we all consume everything, not just fashion,' he says. Over the following five years, the Business of Fashion grew its audience through a mix of considered reporting and analysis about finance, but also topics that Amed felt should be discussed more openly and seriously in fashion, such as how Facebook or the climate crisis might impact the industry or how people might start thinking differently about how they consume clothes.

By 2013, the Business of Fashion, by then more commonly known as BoF, was fast becoming a ubiquitous industry resource, helping to make the business world and business media take fashion more seriously, while making the fashion world and industry take business more seriously. As Amed began formally transforming his successful side-hustle into a global media business (mission statement: 'to open, inform and connect the global fashion industry'), he also started growing his roster of regular contributors. One was his childhood hero Tim Blanks, who was appointed BoF's editor at large. Another was an Italian called Luca Solca, a leading equity analyst specialized in the luxury-goods sector. Having himself been a consultant in the 1990s, Solca was hired in 2002 by one of his clients, It Holding, a key player in Italian fashion at the time, as executive vice-chairman, notably to manage the Galliano, Just Cavalli, D&G, and Versace jeans licenses. When the company was publicly traded, Solca learned more about the 'other side of the table' through the analysts brought in to evaluate the business and decided to switch sides. The ensuing 20 years saw Solca rise to become one of the most respected equity analysts in the luxury goods sector and since 2019, he has been based in Geneva as senior analyst of global luxury goods at Bernstein Private Wealth Management. Holder of both an MBA and a degree in psychology, it's Solca's holistic mix of perspectives that has made his opinion so unique and highly regarded.

'Luca and I have a symbiotic relationship,' explains Amed. 'I like having his perspective for BoF – which, by the way, can sometimes be very controversial and get me into a lot of heat with the brands – because it's a very different take to those found in other places. Likewise, BoF has given Luca a higher profile and a platform, which has helped make him arguably the most visible equity analyst in the entire industry.' Solca, meanwhile, is characteristically rational: 'My contribution has been to bring a bit of science to this artistic industry.'

For *System*'s ten-year issue, we brought together Amed and Solca for a series of conversations through April and May this year, primarily, to discuss the myriad factors that have led fashion's biggest companies – all, incidentally, based in Paris – to experience unprecedented levels of growth over the past decade. Given the fast-paced world of both fashion and the global economy, however, the topics of conversation turned – almost in real time – to equally newsworthy matters: the world's newly announced wealthiest man, Bernard Arnault; the continuing shift in the axis of the global economy; and the breaking news that Arnault's LVMH Parisian headquarters had been stormed by angry protestors. A context of turbulent times and thriving Q1 results felt like an ideal moment to ask Amed and Solca for some measured perspective, response, and prediction.

'Luxury brands have redefined the landmarks of Paris. You now go to see the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, the Fondation Vuitton, and the Dior flagship.'

London, Geneva, Los Angeles
14 April, 24 April, 25 May, 26 May

Jonathan Wingfield: Is it too simplistic to say that Paris is, more than ever before, the centre of luxury fashion?
Luca Solca: Paris is all the more central in the grand scheme of things, because the luxury and fashion industry has continued to consolidate, and the primary grabbers of that are the Parisian companies and conglomerates. If we look at LVMH, Kering, Chanel, Hermès, they have an even greater domination of this industry today than they had ten years ago. As a consequence, they are escalating on a number of fronts, including building extraordinary flagship stores in Paris, which is now head and shoulders above anywhere else for the size and quality of its flagship stores. Just look at what Dior has done on Avenue Montaigne or Vuitton on Place Vendôme. These are incredible developments that were just not on the map a decade ago.

Look at the evolution of luxury fashion's real-estate presence in Paris over the past 25 years and you'll see how fashion 'owns' significantly more than ever before. There's the Fondation Louis Vuitton; the Pinault Collection at the Bourse de Commerce; on a smaller scale, Colette is now a large Saint Laurent store; and Le Castiglione is becoming a Gucci megastore. There are entire luxury-fashion retail neighbourhoods that didn't exist 20 years ago. Has Paris become a fashion playground?
Imran Amed: It's not so different from what I observe in other cities; this is a global thing. Look at what has happened in Mayfair: Mount Street, Bond Street, Dover Street are all dominated by these luxury brands, hotels and restaurants. We now have entire *quartiers* in cities around the world that are luxury playgrounds. It's not just the brands, it's the whole lifestyle: design, art, galleries.
Luca: Rather like you have on Omotesandō [in Tokyo] or Montenapoleone [in Milan].
Imran: You certainly see that happening in Paris, with that incredible Dior store. It is like a symbol of everything that brand stands for, in that historic location where Mr Dior was working, which is now a museum. It is the culture of luxury now. You see the same thing happening even in emerging markets: these dominant luxury brands just cluster together, which in a way is how the customer is shopping, too. It's of course more exacerbated in Paris because of the scale – Rue Saint-Honoré was always full of luxury brands, but now everything is just bigger. Avenue Montaigne is today on a different scale. The whole eighth *arrondissement* – everywhere you look is a luxury store.
Luca: Luxury brands have become cultural players in that they have redefined the architecture and landmarks of major city centres around the world. These developments have become so large and on such a scale that they have become global attractions in their own right. You now go to Paris to see the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, the Fondation Vuitton, and the new Dior flagship store.

What is driving Parisian companies and houses' exponential rate of growth, which is more than, say, their American or Italian counterparts? Is it too easy to say that fashion in Paris has such a rich history?
Imran: Ten or 20 years ago, people talked about the fashion capitals interchangeably – London, Paris, Milan, and New York. Over the last few years Paris *has* become dominant, which I'd put down to the city's ecosystem, in the same way that Hollywood is where the ecosystem for the US film industry is, or Silicon Valley is where the ecosystem for the technology industry is. You have these clusters that just naturally form and over the last ten years, and Paris has consolidated its position as the place where the luxury fashion industry is based. An ecosystem is not just the businesses, it's the talent, the schools, and in fashion's case, also the *métiers d'arts*, the artisans who make things. This culture of fashion has seeped into *everything* in the city, and every designer in the world, whether they are in India, Japan, Belgium or the US, ultimately, wants to show there. They want a presence and a store there. Something has just clicked in the last decade and Paris has become the unrivalled centre.
Luca: I totally agree with Imran that the ecosystem in Paris is infinitely better to elsewhere. The root of this lies in a handful of megabrands with a superior business model that they've been building for the past 30 or 40 years. If we compare Vuitton, Chanel and Dior to Armani, Versace and Valentino, one of the most important differences that stands out is the ability of the Parisian

'Paris has consolidated its position as the centre of the luxury fashion industry; like Hollywood has for the US film industry, or Silicon Valley has for tech.'

megabrands to control distribution. Direct distribution – not being in the hands of wholesale – is inherent to their business model, and this has allowed these brands to produce much more effective and more controlled marketing execution, when it comes to controlling your assortment, controlling your shopping environment, controlling your price execution – for example, not discounting. Over time, it convinces consumers that some brands are more valuable than others. Hermès is an investment brand; you won't find it in end-of-season sales, unlike most American brands and a lot of the Italian brands. Secondly, most of the Parisian megabrands are rooted in accessories rather than apparel, which is a more profitable category. Compare leather goods to apparel and you see better sales-per-square-foot, better full-price sell-through. At the end of the day, you have continuing accumulation of extra resources that you can put to work to reinforce strength and expansion. After 30 or 40 years like that, you build an incredible advantage, in terms of brand appeal and brand recognition, but also, quite simply, financially. The digital revolution of the last 10 to 15 years has only exacerbated this advantage because it has brought more complexity to the industry. It used to be relatively simple: 20 years ago you had to choose a photographer and get photographs published in *Vogue*; today you need to be on countless social-media platforms with different content formats and far more frequent content generation. So you need to spend more money. If you have €20 billion in sales, that can be a rounding error;[1] if you have just €1 billion in sales, that quickly becomes unsustainable.

'Brands like Vuitton have deliberately driven up fixed costs because the more they spend the more they make it difficult for competitors to keep up.'

On the subject of wholesale, the department store was such a significant part of 20th-century fashion, certainly in the States, but today's winning brands completely bypassed that system and reclaimed total ownership of distribution. Who or what is at the origin of that?

Imran: It is this old-new phenomenon of taking out the middleman. It is not only the control you have over the entire customer experience, but also the margins that you are able to earn as a result. We have been talking about the direct-to-consumer revolution on BoF recently, but companies like Vuitton, Hermès and Chanel have insisted on that approach for a long time. They were pioneers in the direct-to-consumer revolutions that we now see happening in all parts of the market.

Luca: This comes from the Parisian megabrands' ability to generate high retail-space productivity. When you think about it, being exposed to retail involves a significant amount of fixed costs, like rental costs for prime locations in the most expensive streets in the world, and front-office sales associates who need to be knowledgeable and speak different languages. The difference between making or losing money with your flagship is purely driven by the amount of sales you drive through your square feet. They have relatively compact products with relatively high average-price tickets, and scale helps a lot. What lies at the core of our megabrand virtual-cycle concept is that the sales-per-square-foot is driven by the absolute amount of communication dollars you pour into the market. So, as you get bigger and bigger, you can put more and more advertising dollars into the market, while sacrificing a relatively small portion of your top line. In the case of Vuitton today, if you look at 5% of their sales, that is €1.1 billion in our calculations, and €1.1 billion is the total sales of many of these small and mid-sized brands that are trying to be revived, like Ferragamo. What is your chance of being seen in this economy of attention when you have a giant dwarfing you and grabbing all of the consumer attention and traffic? Digital has only made the traffic-generation problem more difficult because while consumers have the ability to learn about brands and products online from their KOLs [key opinion leaders], they can also shop online, so there is less interest in coming to the stores. This has forced brands to come to the market with a huge number of new ideas and new initiatives: VIP rooms, temporary exhibitions, pop-up stores, mixing with the art world, and so on. This only increases the bill these brands have to pay, which continues to play into the hands of scale, and continues to increase the megabrands' advantage. Brands like Vuitton have deliberately driven an escalation in fixed costs because it is in their interest. The more they spend on fixed costs, the more they make it difficult for competitors to keep up and stay in the same premier league.

Imran: If you go back to Michael Porter's 'Five Forces' analysis model,[2] which talks about the barriers to entry,

over the past decade or so, the ability for smaller players to compete with brands like Vuitton, Hermès and Chanel is now *very* limited. The barriers to entry have become *so* high. Not just in terms of the investment, but also because these big groups control *all* the retail space and relationships with advertisers. They control the whole ecosystem; they have a lock on it. If you are some upstart, you need to be like Jacquemus, a disruptor who comes in with a completely different marketing model based on the virality of the content you are able to create. These viral moments are the only things I can see that can compete with these brands.

Luca: I agree. The only successful examples of small players building a niche and carving out a space in the market are those that make the most of being different and can be fast to grab opportunities. If you think about Golden Goose,[3] for example, there was a brief moment during which they could have potentially stepped in and stood out as a specialist in sneakers. Whether that is sustainable in the medium term is a different debate, but in the short term it allows them to make money and stay in the game.

'Hermès is an investment brand; you won't find it in end-of-season sales, unlike most American brands and a lot of the Italian brands.'

You have both used the examples of Chanel, Vuitton and Hermès, which all share the idea of tradition and heritage as a fundamental of their communication strategy. It's this link to Paris and to France that appeals to global consumers. Is the appeal of tradition and heritage here to stay or could new generations of consumers around the world find it less appealing?

Imran: I see it slightly differently. Tradition is a fundamental pillar to all those brands, but not their only one; I don't think it is more important than any of the other pillars such as innovation or culture that they communicate. What *is* really interesting is when these things collide. Around 2013, I did some video interviews in the beautiful Chanel *métiers d'arts* ateliers in Paris – like Lesage – what they call the *patrimoine* of Chanel. We put some of those videos of people making things with their hands onto our social channels – way back before those brands were doing that online – and the response from young people online was incredible. This stuff wasn't really visible to customers, but the industry has become much more open over the last ten years. Social media has now enabled the smart brands like Chanel to communicate, beyond the celebrities on red carpets. Have a look at Chanel's YouTube channel to see the incredible storytelling they've done with the Coco Chanel story or about how it creates its products. I don't think tradition is going away – it's here to stay – but it is just one of many communication pillars these brands are using to reach different kinds of customers.

Luca: The fact these brands have a history allows them to have many different elements in their DNA. Tradition is important, assuming of course you continue to update this tradition, because what we are seeing is how major luxury brands have been very quick to integrate the new relevant values in our society into their marketing narratives. Think about the respect of society and the environment, sustainability – these brands are not just about museum products. They have tradition, they have history, but they are also up to date and relevant in the current zeitgeist. Quite clearly, the brands that got there first occupy the most interesting niche because they relate to mainstream values. Think about Coca-Cola and Pepsi as a comparison to Vuitton and Gucci. Gucci has to be over the top to be relevant, while Vuitton can be mainstream and appeal to a broad audience. That gives them a stronger platform because they are centre stage. In that regard, tradition correlates with the ability to occupy the centre of the market, which makes the brand relevant to a large audience.

To what extent is French dominance of the global luxury fashion industry a factor in the wider backdrop of France, economically and politically? It sometimes feels like luxury fashion is an island of exponential growth within France's less robust wider economy and its current political instability.

Luca: Look back over the past 20 years and luxury and fashion have become so much more important to the French economy. The market cap of the luxury-goods sector has significantly increased over that period, which means that a lot of different people can work in this broader ecosystem in one way or another. Luxury is responsible for a significant chunk of the GDP generated in France, as it is in Italy, too. There is an inherent potential conflict when it comes to this industry and broader society, though, because luxury has been thriving by driving income and wealth and inequality. When new markets plugged into the global economy, average GDP per capita increased, but the wealth gap also increased. China and Russia today have very spiky differences between the haves and have-nots. As a consequence, luxury has been serving richer and richer consumers, and to some extent is parting ways with the destiny of some of the more mature European economies. Growth has been very hard to come by in the bulk of Europe – particularly in France and Italy – and as a consequence there is a divide between those in this industry and those who are not. What we saw on Avenue Montaigne with the storming of LVMH's HQ[4] is just a sharp example of this.

Imran: LVMH also has the highest market capitalisation of any company in Europe now, right?[5] That's another metric. I would underscore Luca's point around inequality because I think it's one of the biggest risks the luxury industry faces now. The videos from Avenue Montaigne had a kind of French Revolution feel to them. Whether you are living in London, Bombay or New York, the level of inequality is visible in the streets, and luxury brands and logos might become an emblem of that extreme wealth. I suspect that the next ten years will see more of what we are seeing on the streets of Paris and London. This is just the beginning.

> **'The videos [of protestors storming the LVMH HQ] had a kind of French Revolution feel to them. I suspect we'll see more of this over the next decade.'**

Will that have an effect on luxury's lustre, its appeal, as the next decade progresses? Or is luxury, with its own ecosystem, simply too resilient and robust?

Imran: I would take you back to 2008 and Lehman Brothers triggering the financial crisis that affected the world. That was around when Phoebe Philo was starting her tenure at Céline, and there was this whole thing about 'discreet' luxury. Now over the last couple of months, what we have all been talking and hearing about is 'quiet' luxury. People have become a bit more conscious of the labels and logos and symbols, and so the industry adapts, and starts becoming a little quieter again. We have had an avalanche of really ostentatious, visible luxury these last few years, so maybe this is the trigger for a shift in creative direction that will see more brands like Loro Piana, Zegna and Brunello Cucinelli – the ones riding this early wave – performing well. I think we'll see that kind of quieter luxury aesthetic move to other brands that have been much louder recently, like Gucci or Versace.

Luca: These companies feel this issue, and feel a responsibility to society. Go back to the full-year 2022 LVMH conference and Monsieur Arnault started off by enumerating the contributions that LVMH has made to French society – new jobs added, tax paid over the years, and so on. There is an onus on that, trying to encourage those who have lots of money, and a significantly better living standard than others, to show responsibility to care for the rest of society. When we look at the political implications of this divide, the fine line is when consumers and people at the bottom of the social pyramid stop seeing those at the top as examples to emulate, and instead see them as usurpers and people who got there without merit. That could be a starting point for revolutions. And if, for example, Chinese policy went towards a more populist agenda, then this would clearly be a problem for the global luxury industry. Let me be clear, we have no sign of that at the moment, but I do see a political risk in this inequality situation.

Louis Vuitton surpassed €20 billion in revenue for the first time in 2022 and Hermès this morning posted 22% growth for the first quarter of 2023. Despite the turbulent times, there is a sense that some of the bigger houses are now simply too big to fail. Can you envisage in the coming decades Vuitton doubling its annual revenue to €40 billion? Is there a saturation point?

Imran: I recently had a conversation with an LVMH executive who disclosed to me that they'd had questions about how big Vuitton could become. In their heart of hearts, they didn't know it could become a €20-billion revenue brand – but it has. The momentum the brand has shown has given them the confidence that it *can* grow further. All of that has to be considered against the backdrop of what is happening in the wider economy. We have just been in this unprecedented period of economic growth and then a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic that left lots of money in people's bank accounts, further propelled by stimulus from various governments. I'm interested to hear what Luca thinks about what the next five years are going to look like.

Luca: There are two or three elements we need to factor in. First, the pandemic played a huge role in boosting consumer demand over the past two years. It forced people to save money, and so rich people making significant amounts of money accumulated a huge amount of liquidity. More importantly, it reminded us that life is not forever, and nobody wants to be the richest person in the graveyard. There has been a race to enjoy life, to catch up with time 'wasted' in lockdown, and to enjoy the best things in life – including shopping in luxury goods. The theory was that people would swing from spending on products to spending on experiences, but that was clearly wrong. People are in fact spending on *everything.* This has continued to be especially true at the high end. Look at the statistics: the bulk of growth is being driven by the top decile of consumer spenders. A few days ago, we published data from Global Blue, which can break down their customers by decile, and what you see is that customers in the top decile have increased their spend by 2.6 times between 2019 and 2022. As you move down the deciles, it gets to 2.3 times, 2.1, 1.8, 1.5, to the bottom of the pyramid and the bottom decile, which has increased spend by 60%. My assumption is that over time, this post-pandemic euphoria is going to dissipate, people are going to sober up, but the lucky situation for luxury is that the top nationalities are not in sync. We've been calling it the 'growth relay', because as American consumers start to moderate their spend growth we have the Chinese consumers stepping in – and much faster and to a higher level than most industry insiders anticipated. It is exploding into a spending frenzy that will support the industry for at least another two years. Looking at the fundamental shifts in our society, what we see is the *promise* that this industry brings to consumers: being better, more attractive, and perceived as more intelligent and more appealing, and the promise of exclusivity. That goes hand-in-hand with a huge rise in people being focused on themselves, which is an effect of social media. On Instagram everyone wants to be a star and stand out. That aspiration to be seen from the best angle has clearly fuelled an appetite for luxury brands, which are conduits to achieving that status. It is not surprising then that megabrands have seen so many new consumers coming to them, and that consumers are trying to find inventive ways to finance their appetites for luxury products. The brands have been smart in branching out into relatively low price-point categories so they can guarantee an entry point to aspirational consumers. Think about all these brands such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Hermès, entering beauty, for example, or eyewear, or multiplying their offer in footwear and sneakers. These are all product categories that allow aspirational consumers an entry point because, while in relative terms to non-luxury products they are expensive, in *absolute* terms they are not particularly demanding, and a lot of people can afford them. What we need to see is how this exuberant demand will react to a sharp recession and correction in the stock market. So far, the macroeconomic environment has remained benign, with low levels of unemployment and high job security, so the stock market, despite a significant decline last year, is broadly on an even keel. This could potentially be a question mark in the next five years: if we have a *real* recession then clearly we will not see LVMH and Hermès reporting 18 or 25% growth. To the last point you made about how big these brands can become, a couple of years ago, I wrote a report called *Selling Exclusivity by the Million*, where I went through ten different tools that smart megabrands are using today to get away with murder to sell more and more, while continuing to be perceived as exclusive. Controlling distribution and pricing, and making some of their iconic products very difficult to get, are all conducive to consumers continuing to see these brands as exclusive, even when they sell a lot. People believe Rolex is exclusive and appealing, when in fact they sell more than a million watches a year; Vuitton is selling *several* million handbags every year. It's a remarkable feat of marketing that certain megabrands have been able to pull off. This won't necessarily change going forward because they've perfected their methods.

> **'LVMH executives had questions about how big Vuitton could become. They didn't know it could become a €20-billion revenue brand – but it has.'**

Imran: Look at the Vuitton we see in advertising campaigns, social media and at fashion shows, and then at the Vuitton we see sold in the stores: something like 90% of Vuitton's business is made up of products that are part of a growing but relatively stable set of *mainstays*: classic shapes and silhouettes and materials that are sometimes iterated and specialized with collaborations, like with [Yayoi] Kusama. These are the same designs being made over and over again in quantities that are in the *millions*. When you have that kind of stable business and you have a product like a Birkin or a Kelly bag or a Cartier Tank watch with timeless appeal, that makes you, to use your words, too big to fail. There are a lot of fashion businesses out there looking for that Chanel bicoloured patent shoe or 2.55 bag that doesn't date or go away, but most don't have it. The ones that do, which are those we've been talking about, are pretty set.

Luca: I totally agree. These brands have very deep and very broad roots. It's difficult to dislodge them. Brands with less of a set of connections – those with no iconic products or specific values in their history – probably stand a higher chance of falling into oblivion. What I think we are seeing from experience is that even if you run these brands badly – think of Gucci and its near-death experiences in its past history – the moment you dedicate care and attention to them, they come back big time because they are relevant to consumers. So some of the brands are far more appealing as the foundation for a successful luxury-goods group. A lot of the success we are seeing today is a function of the industry's early entrepreneurs securing the best assets. Richemont, for example, is all about Cartier; LVMH – which of course is a very large and complex business – is all about Vuitton and Dior; and Kering is all about Gucci. These brands are indeed, in my mind, too big to fail. Not to mention Chanel and Hermès, which stand out in their own right.

Is there a moment when the groups could become too dependent on the success of one particular house in order to support the rest?

Imran: On the contrary, I think that Vuitton generates about half of LVMH's total profits, and it is exactly having a mainstay brand – a Cartier, a Gucci, a Vuitton – in the group that allows them to invest in other brands. Luca just mentioned Dior as one of LVMH's megabrands, but five years ago it *wasn't* a megabrand. They have invested in that brand for years and years, and then something in the last few years just clicked. To have that patience, and to invest that much money over such a long period and wait, is key. The thing about people like Monsieur Arnault is that they are patient, and part of what allows them to be patient are money-spinning machines like Vuitton.

Luca: Indeed, these megabrands almost have a licence to print money. To have such a money-printing machine at the core of the group gives you the ability to invest, be patient, and try to get stuff to stick. Then at some point, it *does* stick, like in the case of Dior, and recently, Celine. Bringing in Hedi Slimane was a high-profile bet, but in the grand scheme of things, if it had gone wrong it would have just been a rounding error for LVMH. That is because the free cash flow that Vuitton generates is gigantic. Every year it is in the billions of euros, and that covers a lot of mistakes.

Looking at LVMH's broader stable of brands over the past decade, you can crudely define it as having 50% big hitters and 50% that don't seem to be working, and haven't worked for quite a while. Brands like Kenzo, Berluti, Moynat and others which have never had that same level of performance. How concerning is this for the group?

Imran: In the last ten years, Loewe, Celine and Lora Piana have become billion-dollar brands. Meanwhile, others are looking for the right match. What people like Monsieur Arnault and Mr Rupert [at Richemont] and Monsieur Pinault [at Kering] did early on was snap up all the assets and hold onto them. You know, Kenzo not working for a few years doesn't really matter in the grand scheme of things. A super-high potential, couture-level LVMH brand that everyone is looking at right now, Givenchy, with its incredible DNA and story, has just been waiting for the right match. When they find the right match between the brand DNA, the designer, the business strategy, and what's happening in the zeitgeist – as happened for Céline and Phoebe Philo in 2008-2009 – one of those brands can become a billion-dollar brand. In the meantime they are just part of the portfolio so no one else can have them.

Do you think that keeps Monsieur Arnault awake at night?

Imran: What keeps Mr Arnault awake at night is Vuitton and Dior because they are the engines of his business.

Luca: LVMH has instituted an interesting organizational framework in which the brands get a lot of latitude, because it would be impossible for senior management to stay on top of what all the brands were doing. The heads of the smaller brands get a lot of latitude and a lot of rope, and if they succeed, fine, and if not, they get replaced. At the end of the day, the amount of damage that they can generate is very small indeed.

‘People believe Vuitton is exclusive, when in fact they sell several million handbags each year. That's a remarkable feat of marketing.’

About 20 years ago, PPR [the group now called Kering] hired a senior executive from the frozen-foods sector. At the time I remember it raising some eyebrows in the industry. Fast-forward to now and it seems that the luxury fashion groups are mature enough that they've successfully created a self-recruiting ecosystem. So someone like Cédric Charbit, who started his career as a junior working at the PPR-owned department store Printemps, could then become a successful buyer, and then rise through the ranks to now be CEO of Balenciaga. What are the pros and cons of operating like that and hiring from within, set against hiring people from different sectors who could perhaps be interesting disruptors?

Imran: You were referring to Robert Polet, who was CEO of PPR.[6] He brought in the idea of freedom within a framework, which he brought in from Unilever. The talent point is a really interesting one and gets overlooked; it is not analysed as much as it deserves to be. One of the best things these groups have done is cultivate talent pipelines and opportunities so high-potential talents can have mobility within the group. The bigger your group is, the more brands you have in your portfolio, the more opportunities you have to help people develop specific sets of skills that you need to be a successful executive in the luxury fashion industry. The industry might have once joked about the people who've come over from the consumer packaged goods industries, but they come with a certain understanding of brand, operating on a global level, and supply chains. What's often missing though is a certain understanding of the luxury industry, that certain *je ne sais quoi* that you can only understand once you've been brought through the system. The talent pipelines in some of these groups have been a big part of their success, like, as you mentioned, Cédric Charbit, who went from Printemps to Saint Laurent to Balenciaga. There are a lot of people at Kering, like him, who have come up through the Saint Laurent merchandising role to become CEOs or senior executives at other brands. You have these special talent incubators where if you can continue to provide those talents with opportunities, they will stay with you as opposed to being poached to go to another group. You are creating opportunities where they want to move up, if you can give those opportunities within the group, then that is another barrier to entry for competitors, which is another reason these groups become so dominant: they also have a lock on the talent.

Luca: Conglomerates have a huge advantage when it comes to recruiting, promoting and keeping the best talent. Another example is Pietro Beccari, who moved from being head of Fendi to Dior and now Vuitton. When you have a good executive, you give them more and more responsibility, which reduces the risk of going wrong and increases the ability to produce strong performance. These businesses are incredibly complex so if you can reduce the mistakes you make running them, you're in a very strong position.

Imran: Pietro *did* actually come from the consumer package goods world; he joined Vuitton in marketing.[7]

Luca: He did. The luxury industry is still young but getting strong people from FMCG [fast-moving consumer goods] has been a winning strategy at LVMH. Pietro is a great example. I think someone like [LVMH group managing director Antonio ‘Toni'] Belloni has produced quite a significant amount of value. He's now been at the group for more than 20 years, and before joining LVMH was a senior executive at Procter & Gamble. Or Chris de Lapuente, now running Sephora and the selective-retail division, he also comes from Procter & Gamble. You have companies in FMCG that have been schools of management for a very long time, and a lot of problems within LVMH need a rational mindset and require experience of complex global businesses, like dealing with supply chains, assortment decisions or information systems, and so on. The best companies have been able to combine promoting and retaining talent within the group to being open in terms of recruiting the best possible people from outside industries and getting them to appreciate the specificities and idiosyncrasies of this very different business. They needed to do that because the luxury goods industry literally didn't exist in its modern format 40 years ago, so you had to build a new generation of managers able to run these businesses one way or another. Those who have decided, by contrast, to work in an imperial way, driving decision-making

‘Bringing Slimane into Celine was a high-profile bet, but in the grand scheme of things, had it gone wrong it would've just been a rounding error for LVMH.’

from the top with the notion that founders and entrepreneurs would never be wrong, have incurred a huge number of mistakes by comparison. Think about Prada and how Bertelli was forced to change his approach; he has recently recruited quite a significant number of senior executives whereas in the past he was concentrating all key decisions on himself.

That leads to my next question. Beyond the dominance of LVMH and Kering, do you sense that other company owners have a clear understanding of where to take their businesses, specifically their heritage brands? For example, Diego Della Valle [of Tod's] with Schiaparelli, or Mr Rupert at Richemont with Alaïa. Is it a genius strategy that could lead to their potential growth or more a question of alchemy, of creative sparks flying?

Imran: With the two examples you cited, it just so happens that the creative talents in those businesses have really put them back in the fashion conversation. I mean, Alaïa was always part of the fashion conversation even if he was happy operating on his own. So, the real challenge was could you find a credible successor who could be respectful of Mr Alaïa's approach while also trying to bring the brand into the current day and age? And what Pieter Mulier has done is pretty remarkable. With Schiaparelli, that's Mr Della Valle's personal investment, it is not part of Tod's. He is an industry executive who has a deeply held passion and understanding for something as special as Schiaparelli, but to find the talent like Daniel Roseberry who could actually take it and turn it into something that now seems to be working from a creative standpoint and increasingly from a business standpoint is exciting to see. All that said, even with the heft of major billionaire types, those brands still face all the challenges of competing with Vuitton, Dior, Gucci, Chanel on all the different levels we've just talked about. So it is going to be a long time before you see those brands achieving anything like the success that you see from the brands within the more dominant groups.

You mentioned Tod's, and Luca, you mentioned Mr Bertelli at Prada. I suppose what links those two is the failure of an Italian luxury group to match in any way the success of its French counterparts. With the infrastructure, factories, the allure of Milan and Italian fashion, leather goods, the history of ready-to-wear, all those dynamics, why do you think it has never happened? Is it simply because Italian luxury brands are family-run?

Imran: It's a perennial question.

Luca: When you look at what happened in Italy, at least from my perspective, it is like Hermès on steroids. You saw what happened when LVMH tried to take over Hermès,[8] the family reacted very strongly and fought for independence. Look at the Italian fashion and luxury industry 20 or 30 years ago: none of the entrepreneurs of that time was prepared to surrender and sell out to others, or even partner with others. I think there was, on the table, at one point, a potential merger of Armani and Gucci, which was called off at the 11th hour on the back of Armani having second thoughts and not wanting to give up his independence or renounce his role as king of the castle. With many Italian castles and many Italian kings, there was never one king powerful enough to get them all together and to merge into an Italian conglomerate. The difficulty today, if one was to build a fantasy Italian conglomerate, is to find the cornerstone of it, a megabrand that would be able to generate enough cash, as we were discussing before, like Cartier, Vuitton and Gucci generate for their respective parent companies. There is simply nothing in sight, as far as I can see. It is quite an academic exercise talking about the potential of an Italian conglomerate.

Imran: The closest thing out there, albeit on a much smaller scale, is what Renzo Rosso has been building with OTB [Only The Brave]. I think he has some beautiful brands – John Galliano for Maison Margiela, Francesco Risso at Marni, Lucie and Luke Meier at Jil Sander, and Glenn Martens at Diesel. I guess Diesel is the biggest brand by far in that group; once upon a time it did a billion euros in revenues. But that is nowhere near where it needs to be. As for Prada, Mr Bertelli tried with a number of brands – Helmut Lang and Jil Sander – and I guess they still have Church's. So, yes, I am with Luca; I just don't see it happening.

> **'With many Italian castles and many Italian kings, there was never one king powerful enough to get them all to merge into an Italian conglomerate.'**

Let's turn our attention to Hermès. In an era which arguably is defined by attention-grabbing marketing, logo fashion, and merch-heavy product strategies, Hermès maintains the highest brand equity in the sector, and the company's stock rose almost 25% in Q1 2023. Why?

Luca: Hermès clearly has very high desirability and that is a very important asset that the brand can leverage. It also sits at the top end of the pricing pecking order and some of its products have become so difficult to buy that they have become icons and quintessential products. That helps to drive volumes of other products, partly because you want to be associated with such a powerful brand so you buy a lot of trinkets that have relatively inexpensive costs and prices. You can feel you are part of the brand and this very high-end world by spending just a few hundred pounds on a scarf or a belt. Also, if you want to qualify and be allowed to buy a bag at some point, you have to go through the ordeal of buying a lot of other stuff to even be considered. There is the scarcity element that is most relevant and is similar to the scarcity effect at Patek Philippe, where buying the iconic product has become increasingly difficult.

Would you say Hermès remaining very much a family business means their commitment to maintaining its legacy eclipses the desire for expansion into a group akin to LVMH or Kering?

Luca: Yes, I think that this correct; I still see it primarily as a mono-brand business. They have a few other brands already – they have John Lobb and Puiforcat in their portfolio – but these are again rounding errors at best. They have an interest in focusing on what they do and maintaining strict independence, and I don't see them at any time moving into a different set-up.

Imran: I would put Chanel in the same category. Those brands are managed as family businesses in the long term and the only acquisitions you really see or hear about Chanel and Hermès making are in their supply chains. They are acquiring and securing access to the important luxury materials – skins and supplies – that make their products possible. I don't foresee Chanel or Hermès ever trying to become groups as long as they remain family businesses.

> **'The pandemic reminded us that life's short; nobody wants to be the richest person in the graveyard. There's been a race to enjoy the best things in life.'**

Could the ongoing success of Hermès have a domino effect on the way luxury fashion houses operate in the future, with more emphasis on the house, less reliance on creative directors as marquee names, more constant product range, and less of a desire to become a group?

Imran: I actually think the creative strategy is a function of the business strategy and I think that is true almost throughout the industry. If you talk to a lot of people who have been in fashion for 20 or 30 years now, they say the business strategy has taken over the industry, which has professionalized, industrialized, and globalized. The business strategy is a starting point; it just so happens that the Hermès business strategy – putting the house first with less reliance on creative directors and more consistent product range and less focus on trends – is how their creative strategy manifests. At Dior and Vuitton, the creative directors are very much out front, but because there are multiple creative directors, the house is always bigger than the designer. So, Dior is always going to be bigger than Maria Grazia Chiuri or Kim Jones. Vuitton is bigger than Virgil was, and it is bigger than Ghesquière and bigger than Pharrell. But the creative director as hero remains a strategy employed by many brands – Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Valentino and others – that are still putting these stars out front. Gucci had a relatively quiet period with Frida Giannini, who was perhaps not a larger-than-life personality as a creative director, before they plucked Alessandro Michele from behind-the-scenes at the house. He was out front and visible, and his aesthetic was so unique that it became converged with Gucci, and that's what made the Gucci growth spurt happen. It will be interesting to see what they do with this €10-billion business and what they do when Sabato De Sarno starts. To what extent will Gucci be bigger and more out front than he is? At other brands where they are still scaling up, the designer is still quite important. What Matthieu Blazy is doing at Bottega and what Jonathan Anderson is doing at Loewe makes them really part of what propels those brands, because there is a different business strategy being employed around growth. Sometimes to really drive growth you need a person or a personality who you can connect with a brand. Especially when a brand is in the early stages of entering the public consciousness.

Where do Kering and LVMH go to find growth in new categories? Could you envisage LVMH or Kering acquiring a company like, say, Rolls-Royce? Or

perhaps Gagosian, and by extension the estates of leading artists? Or other 'experiential' sectors akin to LVMH's acquisition of Belmond? Or maybe even a Hollywood movie studio or production company to double-down on fashion's proximity to celebrity?

Luca: Two of the most recent initiatives at LVMH – the one in luggage with Rimowa and the one in high-end hotels with Belmond – reveal an interest in potentially exploring adjacent product categories and services, provided that the markets are somewhat fragmented and there is no other obvious incumbent. There should be some potential synergies with what they have already been doing. High-end hotels, for example, are a good way, in my view, to maintain a longstanding relationship with very rich consumers who could potentially get tired of buying personal luxury goods before they get tired of travelling to the nicest hotels in the world. By having them onboard, you can potentially find good ways to reignite a dialogue with them for your core brands, by subtly placing their products or potentially finding ways to talk about them appropriately while they are a captive audience in your hotel. There is definitely an interest in this space. Both LVMH and Kering have recently in-housed their licensees in eyewear, and this dovetails with the interest in more tightly controlling distribution: choosing exactly which stores the products will go to, tighter control of pricing, and also a more cohesive and consistent way of managing communication budgets. So, on the margin, I think that it does make sense. Furniture and lighting are also quite fragmented, and we've seen brands like Fendi make good inroads into them. At the end of the day, they relate to a similar desire to stand out and to surround yourself with beauty and beautiful products.

Imran: By necessity, category expansion is something these companies will consider for a few reasons. There are only so many of these really special brands that have all that built-in DNA and storytelling material available. When you don't have many more options of acquiring more brands, you start with the customer. How do you increase that customer's spend across *everything* that you do under a certain brand? You lift the overall perception of a brand by operating in those new categories, and the customer then thinks it is a richer brand universe and may engage with you more.

> **'While the fastest-growing markets are China, the Middle East and India, the boards of most brands have zero representation from those customers.'**

What about brands or groups acquiring, investing more heavily in, or properly developing tech?

Imran: Luxury fashion brands are really aware of what their core competency is when it comes to the work they do and the businesses they are building. While tech can be an incredible enabler for luxury brands to engage with customers in a variety of ways, I haven't yet seen much proof that they can bring and develop and create propriety technology internally that actually leads to successful outcomes. One pretty obvious example is when Richemont first acquired Net-a-Porter, and then subsequently acquired the YOOX Net-a-Porter group. Both times, they found that the technology management of that aspect was not something they were very good at. And in fact, they have ended up destroying value there.

Luca: When you move into technology, you need to be in a position to do it better than the incumbents. To be fair, this is definitely not the case when we think about products; Apple, for example, is in a much better position – an *incomparably* better position – to bring value into this space by providing differentiated products in terms of what they do and how they work. Not even companies that have, one could argue, specialized in high-end tech like Bang & Olufsen, are in a position to stay in this championship, let alone luxury brands that come from a totally different background and have no experience either in terms of products or spec services. It requires a different mindset, a different competitive advantage, different people and cultures.

Will that particular case act as something of a cautionary tale for fashion about going into a culture and expertise that is simply too far removed from its core competences?

Luca: Yes, I think so. And it is important to take into account what works and what doesn't in technology, because if you have a strong brand, you are able to generate traffic through your physical stores and also through your brand dot-com, so basically moving into multiband digital luxury distribution is just not a good idea, no matter how you look at it or who does it. At least, it *could* be a good idea eventually, after you have lost a ton of money, which is not necessarily what you set out to do as a luxury-goods player.

The luxury groups operate a top-line strategy of merger and acquisition as opposed to research and development. Imran, given that you mentioned earlier this idea of there *not* being a limitless well of high-potential heritage brands, could you see a point where it would make more market sense for the groups to start developing entirely new brands from scratch?

Imran: They have tried, and they have failed. They are not really good at it. This is not an exception in the fashion industry; if you look at most large global companies that generate billions of dollars in revenue, they tend not to be good at creating and innovating from within, which is why they tend to stick with an M&A strategy. If you think about Altuzarra at Kering or Nicholas Kirkwood at LVMH, Christopher Kane, John Galliano, Christian Lacroix – all of these were efforts in one way or another for a major group to try and take something really small and turn it into something big. But it is just not in their DNA to do that. It's also a structural thing, just how big companies work. The management theory behind this is like Geoffrey Moore's book *Crossing the Chasm*[9]. Typically, it is very hard for big companies to embrace disruptors or new ideas, because they are so invested in their existing businesses that whatever new ideas they may have – and they may be good ideas – they just never focus enough attention or resources to make them a success.

Luca: It is not necessarily easier to run a small brand than it is a big brand. I think the point Imran is making is absolutely correct. There is no incentive for executives to focus and concentrate their efforts on small brands, unless they are at the very early stage of their career, and are brought into the group with that, and then promised higher responsibilities as they succeed. For start-ups and entirely new businesses, they probably set up different vehicles for that. Something like private equity or angel investors and keep them out of the LVMH group because it would give them the opportunity to recruit the right people and to have the right incentives in place including equity participation and so on.

Imran: The one exception is Jonathan Anderson. When LVMH did that deal for him to take over Loewe, they also made significant investment in his own business, JW Anderson. Because they saw him as a prolific and high-potential creative talent in the group, who has managed to change the fortunes of Loewe, one way to keep him engaged was to put this stake into his own business. And he is one of those rare designers who can oversee multiple brands in a way that is successful and differentiated. On the rare occasion when there is a really high-potential creative talent, these groups will make an investment with a view that the person will take on a creative role in one of their bigger brands, either immediately or down the road. It is a way of solidifying the relationship. Recently we saw LVMH making an investment in Phoebe Philo's namesake brand, which is coming in September, but again I think that is more about solidifying the relationship.

> **'One of the frustrations that so many customers in Asia have is that they're only seen as consumers of luxury – I use the word 'consumer' intentionally.'**

Turn now to the idea of new markets, certainly the markets we have seen evolving in real time over the last decade. How would you summarize China's evolution in the luxury fashion marketplace over the last decade?

Luca: Clearly, China has been the most prominent new market added to the global luxury goods industry, make no mistake. There has been a series of moments, if we go back 50 years, when the modern luxury goods industry was reinvented from the ashes, thanks to a long list of new markets moving into luxury. Initially Japan, then the Middle Eastern countries, then Russia and then in the past 20 years or so it has all been about China, with even more Southeast Asian markets in the background being added to the long list of countries where luxury goods brands operate. It is not surprising, because my sense is that the fundamental promise that luxury brands offer consumers is standing out from the crowd and being their best selves by owning and buying these products and brands. This desire to stand out is nowhere stronger than in the markets where you had enforced equality. In communist China, where everyone was dressed the same and riding the same bicycle and then all of a sudden, differences were permitted and consumers flocked to luxury brands as if there were no tomorrow. That aspiration to stand out and be different and better will continue to be strong as long as the overall international trade situation allows it.

Imran, what broader impact has this had on the global luxury fashion industry?

Imran: The most obvious business impact has been incredible growth and momentum in the market. When you open a new market like that with such huge demographics and undergoing structural economic change that enables it to flourish as the Chinese economy has, it creates a massive opportunity. The Chinese are playing a similar role to the role the Japanese and the Americans did at different points in the past. What is really interesting is the speed at which that discernment around fashion and luxury happened in China, the level of sophistication and taste that Chinese customers have in terms of understanding the brands, and the care with which they engage with those brands. The other really interesting business impact has been diversification, and we are seeing that right now. We were talking earlier about how just a few months ago luxury executives were pretty downbeat about 2023 in terms of maintaining the rapid double-digit growth that we have seen in the industry over the last few years. Then, lo and behold, Xi Jinping in China announces at very short notice that they are doing away with their zero-Covid strategy and three months, four months into 2023, the Chinese market is booming.

‘I think the old model of having the creative director as an all-powerful creature has long succumbed to the complexity of the market environment.’

Luca: Chinese consumers’ significant contribution to the global luxury-goods industry also means that luxury-goods brands really need to be much more capable of running global organizations. There are countless ways that you can make your business and global messages, even your products, relevant locally, but that demands you recruit the highest level of local talent, and create organizations that are more sophisticated than just working from centralized quotas in Paris and Milan and leaving all the key decisions to French or Italian executives. The significant importance of China, with its very specific culture and social circumstances, has required that large luxury goods companies integrate Chinese talent in virtually all of the steps of the value chain.

You’ve both mentioned how quickly the Chinese have acquired both the business culture and a discernment around luxury goods in China. With this in mind, could you envisage a globally successful luxury fashion brand emerging from China; one that is no longer reliant on the cultural traditions of Europe?

Imran: Yes, it is such an interesting point and important question, because one of the frustrations that so many customers in Asia have is that they are only seen as consumers of luxury. I use the word ‘consumer’ intentionally there – I typically don’t like to use that word – because if luxury brands in the West only see Chinese customers, or customers from other parts of Asia, as consumers then they’re missing an opportunity because there is creativity in those countries, as there is everywhere in the world. One of the most recent developments that we have been observing in the Chinese market is the growth of home-grown brands. Are any of those brands on the scale yet of the major European brands? No. But is there interest from Chinese customers in buying Chinese brands? Yes, absolutely there is. One of the interesting ways that that has started to happen is a lot of young creative Chinese people have studied in fashion schools in the West – at Central Saint Martins, Antwerp or Parsons – and then returned to China to set up what you might call hybrid businesses where they do a lot of the operational manufacturing and back-office work in China but have strong relationships in the West where they show their collections. It is a Chinese-run and Chinese-owned business that is connected to the West. Hermès actually tried to build a native luxury brand called Shang Xia,[10] which didn’t work out for them. You do see the emergence of these Chinese-led businesses and we should one day see a major brand come out of China.

Luca: Yes, and we already have a number of brands standing out from the crowd, think of Icicle,[11] for example, which holds promise. I see hundreds of them actually. There is going to be a very high mortality rate though, and only a handful of them will come to prominence. I think this is going to happen sooner in the accessible luxury market than in the high end but I think we should be prepared to find examples at all price points.

This next question is as philosophical as it is related to culture or education, but could you envisage Made in China one day gaining the same status as Made in Italy?

Luca: The Japanese were once seen as copycat players and now Made in Japan stands for the highest technology and quality level. So why not? In a number of product categories, China has already reached high and sophisticated quality levels, take eyewear, for example, so I don’t think there is anything particularly standing in the way of Chinese workers acquiring some of the most sophisticated competencies. There are clear learning curves for them to embrace and go through. China has been upgrading the quality of its products for a while when we look at apparel or leather goods, so I don’t think it’s impossible.

Imran: The other thing I would add is that I have observed in different markets, not just in China, but in India and Southeast Asia, how the luxury industry is currently obsessed with craftsmanship and crafts in particular. Oftentimes, what countries in these other parts of the world can offer is a link to their own history with crafts. When you marry that craft with design, you take these age-old techniques and combine them with a design sensibility that is marketable and appealing on a global level. That is where there are really interesting opportunities for these countries to be part of the ‘Made in’ phenomenon that you see around the world. If you think about the recent Dior show they did in India,[12] for years, these luxury brands have been silently making embellished and embroidered garments in India, which has a very long history and tradition of passing down this age-old craft for generations. The show that Maria Grazia Chiuri did in India was the reflection of a 20-year relationship that she has had with this one particular atelier of artisans in Bombay, and it was just really powerful to see this Made in India, which doesn’t necessarily have the same cachet as Made in Italy or Made in France. But Made in India, Made in China, Made in Vietnam – all these countries have traditional crafts and skills they can offer to the luxury market globally.

A fashion critic told me that Miuccia Prada is genuinely curious about understanding the distinction between making something she thinks is great but that doesn’t sell versus making something more pedestrian that makes her company a fortune. She says, ‘I make a black dress and a pink dress, why does Prada sell ten times more the black dress? I make a brown coat and a leopard-print coat, how come Miu Miu makes ten times more from the leopard-print coat?’

Imran: When you think about the two examples you cited, a black dress and a leopard-print coat, it kind of goes back to what we were talking about earlier. In people’s minds, the thing they want to invest in at a Prada-level price point is a timeless thing: a black dress. I mean, there is a reason why we think of a LBD; for me, part of it comes down to, if you are going to invest two or three thousand dollars in a Prada dress, are you going to get the black one or the pink one? Very few people can get the pink one and justify it. There is that elite customer group that maybe have 70 Birkin bags, but for the average person if they are going to drop that kind of cash, they are going to get the iconic product, which in part is what makes it worthy of the investment.

‘This is an industry, not an art. If it was enough to be very creative and produce a piece that goes into a museum, it wouldn’t be a business.’

Luca: This is, I think, a very interesting question and the answer is to see that the merchandising director and the creative director are possibly equally important. And this is a point that Kering has embraced very successfully, wanting to get creativity that is both distinctive and commercially viable. We look at the partnership at Gucci between Alessandro Michele and Jacopo Venturini, that has been a very effective duo – both in terms of driving the aesthetics of the time, and in terms of driving financial performance. So, I don’t think the two need to be mutually exclusive, you just need to have an eye on both elements, because this is an industry, not an art. If it was enough to be very creative and produce a piece that goes into a museum, it wouldn’t be a business. In order for it to be a business, the creativity has to be commercially viable. So these two functions, elevated at the same level, probably guarantee that we have better results. I think the old model of having the creative director as an almighty, all-powerful and all-knowing creature in the designer-centric organizations we had in Italy in the late seventies or in the eighties, has long succumbed to the complexity of the market environment. So, you need better set-ups than that.

The representation in the fashion industry of people from broader ethnic, gender, queer, and other communities has evolved over the past decade – arguably, in response to shifts and events felt outside the industry. Where do you see evidence of the positive changes within the industry – in particular at C-suite and boardroom levels – and what have these changes brought about? Where in particular do you see the need for improvement?

Imran: I would say that this is historically an industry that has both actively

> **‘If I were in Mr Arnault’s shoes at this stage, I would be thinking, what is it that I want to leave behind besides the world’s largest luxury group?’**

and systemically excluded people who are different from the kind of elite privileged people who originally ran this industry, and who continue to run it. I don’t think that has changed that much, even with the events happening in the world, even with high levels of consciousness about the value that different perspectives can bring to the way a business is run and how it works. This is even more salient if you just think about who the customer base of the luxury fashion industry currently is. It is no longer dominated by people in North America and Western Europe. In fact, as we previously discussed, the biggest, faster-growing markets are all in Asia or the global south, and it is really interesting and slightly counter-intuitive that while your fastest growing markets are in China and the Middle East and India, the boards of most of the companies have absolutely zero representation from those customers. When you are thinking about strategies or having to make decisions about the kind of long-term direction of these companies, if you don’t have those perspectives in the boardroom, how can you make those decisions effectively? Kering has made some progress in its board structures; there are a few female CEOs at Kering and at LVMH, people like Francesca Bellettini at Saint Laurent or Pascale Lepoivre at Loewe, but you can really count the female CEOs on one hand. Probably the most notable appointment in recent years was Leena Nair as global CEO at Chanel, which is a position that had been vacant for quite some time, in fact since another woman, Maureen Chiquet, departed. As a person of colour and someone who comes from India, that is probably the most interesting shift that I have seen, especially for a company like Chanel, which is one of the most elitist exclusive and privileged brands and leadership groups historically. That’s a big and promising change from them. Overall, when I look around the industry, I can say that most of the people don’t look like me. On the creative side, it is almost exactly the same issue, very few female creative directors, and so that is why Virgil’s time at Vuitton was such a lightning bolt for so many people in the industry. Even after his passing, he has become a role model for so many young people who don’t come from these privileged backgrounds and want to see an opportunity for themselves in the industry. So yes, there has been a little bit of change but not nearly enough.

Should LVMH or Kering invest more in philanthropy? Or rather, in the future, would it be naive to think that they’d *need* to invest more in, say, saving the Amazon forest?

Imran: No, it’s not naive, I also don’t think it is a question specific to fashion. All companies are thinking about how and what and why they should give back to the communities they operate in. Some of the sensitivity around the speed with which Kering and LVMH made donations to the Notre-Dame restoration project[13] was that when other things in the world happen, they don’t donate as much money or take action as quickly. I think that is partially because they’re not thinking as broadly about the community that they operate in. As global companies that have supply chains and customer bases around the world, my only reflection is that all global companies need to think and give back globally. That would include things that sit outside where their companies are headquartered, but also where their employees live and work and where their customers live and work. That is where business is heading now, some are calling it stakeholder capitalism; you don’t only think about your shareholders, you think about stakeholders, customers, your employees, and the communities where you operate. It isn’t a naive question; the role these businesses have to play in wider society is even more important now, because they are generating so much wealth and so much profit. And the question is at what point do they need to start giving some of that back?

Finally, *Succession* has captivated audiences around the world in the last few months, and fashion has its own real-life succession playing out at LVMH. Does the reality of LVMH’s future succession mean the group can sustain its market confidence and growth beyond the lifetime of Bernard Arnault?

Luca: He could stay in the job for another five years at least, but for sure the issues of succession will have to be addressed and effectively resolved.

Imran: I think the succession feels very secure. The difference between the TV show is that the potential successors here are all ambitious unlike the characters on the TV show. They are more talented and hardworking, and they seem to get along much better with each other. Let’s be honest, Bernard Arnault is a once-in-a-generation entrepreneur who stands alongside legendary business leaders like Steve Jobs and Walt Disney in what he has created. That is his legacy. No single person will replace him. The siblings as a group will succeed him and it won’t be one person who everyone looks at. I think he has left a whole group of people who have been schooled and educated in business from a very young age, and they are all very capable.

Luca: My understanding is that this is an issue for all the other companies we have talked about. If we look at LVMH, Kering, Richemont, Swatch group.

What do you think Bernard Arnault’s legacy will be?

Luca: Arnault has definitely been able to unlock the opportunity of high-end brands appealing to a very large audience, while maintaining their exclusivity in the eyes of the audience. If I was to squeeze it to the very core, this is the lesson that European luxury has taught American luxury. While American brands or aspiring luxury brands have at some point met with huge commercial success, they were not able to administer and manage this success to maintain the success over time. They went overboard. I remember Michael Kors being distributed on all four corners of the road, and quickly becoming ubiquitous and quickly losing his cachet.

Imran: Legacy is very much linked to this idea of giving back as well. If I were in Mr Arnault’s shoes at this stage I would be thinking a lot about that. You know, once you have created so much, what is it that you want to leave behind besides the world’s largest luxury group?

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1. Rounding error is an accounting term that means, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an ‘error in a calculation resulting from the use of rounded numbers at intermediate steps’. The idea has been extended to describe a figure that might seem large when seen in isolation but is actually small or immaterial to a large company.

2. First proposed by Harvard Business School professor Michael Green in 1979, the ‘Five Forces’ is an analytical model for understanding the competitive forces that shape an industry and help determine its strengths and weaknesses. The five forces are: bargaining power of buyers; bargaining power of suppliers; threat of new entrants; threat of substitute products or services; and rivalry among existing competitors. Harvard Business School claims that Porter’s model ‘started a revolution in the strategy field’ and continues to ‘shape business practice and academic thinking today’.

3. Founded in 2000 in Venice, Italy, by designers Francesca Rinaldo and Alessandro Galdo, Golden Goose is a high-end sneaker and clothing company with the philosophy of ‘perfect imperfections’. In 2020, it was sold to Permira, the private equity firm that owns, among other brands, Dr. Martens.

4. On 13 April 2023, a small group of striking railway workers protesting against proposed reforms of the French pensions regime forced their way into the Louis Vuitton headquarters at 22 Avenue Montaigne. A video of their action shows them taking the escalator to the first floor amid the sounds of alarms, while chanting ‘there’s money in the bosses’ coffers’.

5. In early June 2023, LVMH had a market capitalization of €407.75 billion, €137 billion higher than Europe’s second-largest company, semiconductor manufacturer ASML Holding. In April 2023, LVMH became the first European company to achieve a $500-million market capitalization.

6. “Can the emperor of ice cream survive under the hot lights of high fashion?” asked Cathy Horyn in the *New York Times* after Robert Polet, previously president of Unilever’s ice-cream and frozen-food division, was appointed as president and CEO of Gucci in April 2004. When the Dutch business executive took in 2004, over eight of the company’s ten brands were losing money; by 2008, nine, including Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Balenciaga, and Boucheron, were profitable.

7. Pietro Beccari worked in marketing for Benckiser in Italy and Parmalat in the USA, and was corporate vice-president for haircare at Henkel in Germany before joining Louis Vuitton in 2006.

8. In 2010, LVMH raised its stake in Hermès to over 20% and became the largest individual shareholder. The Hermès family responded by creating a holding company to avert what they considered LVMH’s attempt at a hostile takeover. After Hermès sued LVMH in 2012, the French competition authority fined LVMH €8 million in 2013 for having disguised its purchases of Hermès stock. In 2014, the two companies reached a legal agreement that saw LVMH withdraw financially from Hermès. The result was a profit of €3.4 billion for Bernard Arnault’s company. ‘You might say we’ve been convicted, but it’s very good news,’ said Pierre Godé, then-vice-president of LVMH. ‘We’d love to see punishments like this every day.’

9. Geoffrey A. Moore’s book *Crossing the Chasm: Marketing and Selling Disruptive Products to Mainstream Customers* is considered a classic guide to bringing cutting-edge products to larger markets.

10. In 2008, Hermès joined forces with Chinese designer Jiang Qiong’er to created Shang Xia, a Chinese fashion brand based in traditional Chinese handicraft. After 12 years of losses, Hermès sold its majority stake in the business to Exor, the group controlled by the Agnelli family.

11. Founded in 1997 by Tao Xiao Ma and her husband Ye Shou Zeng, Icicle is, according to its website, ‘a major player in high-end eco-friendly clothing and accessories for women and men, based on a natural-way ethical fashion philosophy’. It is controlled by ICCF Group, which is based in both Shanghai and Paris, and also owns French house, Carven.

12. On 31 March 2023, Dior staged its Pre-Fall 2023 show in Mumbai to celebrate the city’s Chanakya Ateliers, with whom Maria Grazia Chiuri has collaborated for over 20 years.

13. In the days that followed the fire in Notre Dame in Paris on 15 April 2019, François-Henri Pinault of Kering and Patrick Pouyanné, the CEO of French energy company Total, pledged €100 million each towards the cathedral’s restoration. Bernard Arnault of LVMH and the L’Oréal-funded Fondation Bettencourt Schueller then promised €200 million each. Pinault and Arnault both signed agreements to hand over the money in September 2019.

Susanna Lau & Bryan Yambao

Bryan: You're Susie Bubble; I'm Bryanboy. Those are the identities that we've created for ourselves. Do you think we get treated differently because of those names?

Susanna: For sure. At the beginning people took the piss out of us. Endlessly. Bitched about us in their cars. They were snide. Not even snide behind our backs. Snide to our faces.

Interview by Rahim Attarzadeh

Despite their years of success, Susanna Lau and Bryan Yambao have always felt like fashion outsiders. Since they emerged on the industry's fringes back in the early 2000s as Susie Bubble and Bryanboy, they have built formidable careers not so much as traditional critics, but more as 'fashion cheerleaders' (as they prefer to call themselves), building insider status from the outside.

Lau founded her blog, Style Bubble, in spring 2006 from her home in London, inspired by a love of Camden Town's vintage clothing and subcultures. Yambao, a former web developer and digital architect, began writing from his parents' home in Manila aged 24, on a blog he named Hysterically Camp. Between them, they toiled to build up their follower bases – reaching hundreds of thousands – and shaped their online personalities with an enlivening mix of razor-sharp commentary, incisive reviews and just the right amount of erudite sass. (Yambao was even honoured in 2008 when Marc Jacobs named the BB Bag after him.)

Through their tireless blogging, which pioneered a much-replicated tone of voice, and self-styled photoshoots using various self-taught, labour-intensive digital processes, the two paid their dues and earned their passage from outsiders to front-row habitués. Their talent, passion, and perceptiveness have also been noticed by the fashion-media establishment: in September 2022, Yambao was appointed editor in chief of Katie Grand's magazine, *Perfect*, while Lau now writes for the Business of Fashion, *ES Magazine*, and the *Guardian*.

Lau and Yambao sat down in East London to discuss the appearance of politics and the politics of appearance, their complex and ever-evolving rapport with Paris Fashion Week, and transcending the stereotypes associated with the terms 'blogger' and 'influencer'.

> **'Fashion doesn't have to revolve around Paris Fashion Week. You can have a really successful brand and not do any of that. Just exist virtually.'**

London, 22 April 2023

Rahim Attarzadeh: Over a decade in which the fashion industry seems to have become more international than ever, is it too simplistic to say that Paris remains the centre of luxury fashion?

Susanna Lau: That just hasn't been the case for so long.

Bryan Yambao: *No.* No.

Susanna: Since I started my blog. This was 2006, and you started in?

Bryan: In 2004.

Susanna: I felt like you could already see the centre of fashion or at least that ivory tower of fashion shifting because it was when things were starting to filter out online. Fashion was being exposed to more people internationally. Someone growing up in Mexico City…

Bryan: …or Manila or Memphis…

Susanna: Exactly. These people were being introduced to a world that would have previously been inaccessible, unless you followed the collections through those crazy *Collezioni*[1] books.

Bryan: Which I still have! Growing up, I felt that Paris was the place for couture, but I was actually more interested in Italian ready-to-wear.

Susanna: I grew up in London, so that was my style centre. I didn't come into fashion through high fashion. I came in from growing up in Camden and seeing vintage shops and street style. It was a very different way in. To me, Paris almost felt like an abstract concept.

Bryan: I know! It never really felt like it set the tone in terms of collections.

Susanna: I mean, I was on the Fashion Spot forums;[2] I was a forum girl.

Has all that now been overtaken by Instagram and TikTok? Is the focus now more on the online profile or persona, rather than a thread or conversation on a forum?

Susanna: There are all different kinds of platforms, and the comments you see on Instagram are just another sort of forum posting except without the anonymity. It is a different commentary that is shifting, and just like below-the-line comments and Reddit, they are different communication platforms that happen to be more front-facing, so that your image becomes front and centre, as with the development of Facebook. Face-book, literally, some might say.

Bryan: I remember you taking selfies in front of the mirror without your face; I was also there trolling.

Susanna: [Laughs] Oh! You were a lurker! See, I was practically a moderator there so when the collections would come out on Style.com you would be racing to see it. In Milan, it was Prada and Jil Sander. Paris was Balenciaga because it was the Nicolas Ghesquière era.

Fast-forward to 2023, is Paris the leading city in terms of influence on fashion? Is New York out of the picture?

Susanna: It's tricky. It operates on different levels where you have people who are much more connected to their local scene. Wherever you are, there is a local designer scene. You could go to a fashion week in every country and city, every day of the year, and you can see the talent pool expanding. It's just that they end up convening in Paris, and for most creatives it's still the goal to be there and be exposed internationally. I don't know – there are so many scenes now. Fashion doesn't have to operate or revolve around fashion week. You can have a really successful brand and not do *any* of that. Just exist virtually and be making more than a brand that shells out a ton of money for a show in Paris.

> **'I would hesitate to call myself a fashion critic, because even though I do write for publications, I am more into the idea of fashion cheerleading.'**

Do you feel today that as a reporter, you have to cover Paris in order to have a prominent voice in the fashion-media landscape?

Susanna: That's an interesting question. We talk about this a lot. When it comes to Paris, I feel like we get the most stressed. Actually, I would hesitate to call myself a critic because even though I do write for publications, I am more into fashion cheerleading. I'm not like Vanessa Friedman, who works for a paper and can't take gifts and so on. In terms of being in the thick of the action, you can't get a sense of what is happening in the industry without seeing it happening in Paris, not just because of the shows but more because of the conversations that you have with your peers and colleagues at those shows. It's what's happening on the sidelines, the 15 minutes on the front row before the show begins. Those are the illuminating moments.

Bryan: It's also the last leg of the tour. There's stress because in a way…

Susanna: That's where all the power players are.

Bryan: Yes, the barometer. In terms of access, it's the hardest to get into.

Susanna: There's still a lot of gatekeeping.

Bryan: A *lot* of gatekeeping. Paris is still very, very traditional. I've been going to the shows for like 15 years and every fashion week, four or five times a year, you notice what kind of seating we have or what allocations we are getting. There's always drama getting the access, unless you're an old-school editor in chief; that's when you have the credibility to enter.

Susanna: But you *are* an editor in chief now!

Bryan: I know!

Susanna: So now you've felt it on all sides.

Bryan: I'm still feeling it on all sides and Paris is still that place where a lot of gatekeeping happens.

Susanna: There are definitely still moments in Paris that set the tone. It clearly has the most eyeballs, according to Vogue Runway's top-ten shows or BoF top tens. Saint Laurent, I think was the top show this season. In terms of eyeballs, it's still the city.

Bryan: It's home to the megabrands.

Susanna: But it's more because Paris is a natural meeting place, and the landscape is vast. Designers from all over the world somehow end up in Paris. It's the nucleus.

What's your relationship with Paris Fashion Week been like since the beginning of your respective careers and trajectories?

Bryan: We've paid our dues!

Susanna: I've gone from standing at most shows to, well, not *automatically* front row now. But we've definitely paid our dues. Can you remember your first show? I actually can't remember my first Paris Fashion Week show.

Bryan: It was in 2010; Chanel was my first show. Couture was maybe in 2009.

Susanna: We weren't super-close back then, but we knew each other, and I knew your blog had predated even mine, so why did you wait so long to come to shows?

Bryan: The expense!

Susanna: It is expensive.

Bryan: Looking back on my first Milan Fashion Week, I didn't even stay at a hotel. I stayed at a friend's student dorm; he is now working as a chief brand officer at a Parisian house.

Susanna: When I first went to New York I stayed on Phil Oh's sofa in Bushwick.

Bryan: I did Craigslist before Airbnb!

Susanna: Paris, I went quite early. I started my blog in 2006 and I started working for *Dazed* in 2008, when I started going to shows. I had to attend.

Bryan: You got your credentials through *Dazed*?

Susanna: It was sort of a weird thing with PRs who knew me from outside of *Dazed*; sometimes my allocation would come from me and sometimes from them. Within *Dazed* you had to be part of the hierarchy so I'd either be getting a standing ticket or row six.

Bryan: It's fascinating. I didn't even get seated. I've been going to Comme des Garçons for the longest time and I'd always get a standing ticket. I never really got seated until I started working for *Perfect*. I was fine with it though because I love Comme.

Susanna: They operate a whole other hierarchy. It's so small and they're so loyal to their retailers and the stylists and editors who have really supported them. They're one of the few that don't just look at the media landscape and say, 'This person is hot right now, therefore we're going to have them.'

Susie, you've spoken about how London's appetite for subculture and style generated your interest in fashion. How do you feel about the relationship between the two cities' respective fashion weeks? Do you find London designers need to show in Paris at some stage to help grow their careers?

Susanna: That is an enduring thing for designers in London because of who came before. The likes of McQueen and Galliano left a real imprint, a sort of pathway for designers to follow them.

Bryan: Stella McCartney, Victoria Beckham…

Susanna: To show in Paris, to get to Paris – it's the end goal and over the years I've discussed this with designers like Jonathan Anderson, Christopher Kane, and others. They all have different takes on it and they have all felt differently at different times. There was a moment, maybe in 2008 or 2010 when London Fashion Week was getting really hot – Christopher's collections were incredible; Erdem, too – and there was a real energy here like, 'Oh, we don't need Paris!' You can be a really successful independent designer in London, but the limitation is that there's only so far that you can go with building an independent brand. Very few have really scaled it up to *maison* level.

Bryan: Or they only last for like three years. That's the fashion game of musical chairs.

Is that ultimately because business is business? Fashion was being referred to as an industry as early as the eighties, but nowadays it operates on a mass industrial scale – with a lot more zeros. If a designer doesn't meet this financial criteria and demand, they can exit as soon as they enter.

Susanna: Longevity can be achieved as a creative director of a bigger house, a French house, where you have so much more to play with – an atelier, every resource at your disposal. Weirdly, it's now become a thing again. If you look at things like Harris Reed going to Nina Ricci. For him, as he said on social media, it's a dream – and I think it is still the dream. It's this thing about going to and helming a house, but at the same time building your own universe. A lot of Brits have been really clever, with Jonathan Anderson being the prime example. He's championed that idea of doing his own thing in tandem with Loewe. Most people would want that; you wouldn't want to give it up.

Bryan: That's one in a million though, when you think about it. It's rare for a creative coming from outside Paris, getting that prime creative-director position. To actually succeed in it is another challenge in itself.

Susanna: There's just a handful of positions. There are only so many available. When one comes up, it's so crazy. I've had so many conversations with different designers who were up for different positions at different points. They maybe got to an interview stage, and some were offered it. Some turned it down, for sure; others lost out to another designer.

On the other end of the spectrum, there has been the rise of independents. We've obviously seen it in the past with the likes of Rei Kawakubo and Vivienne Westwood. Are we seeing that happen again with the likes of Molly Goddard, Simone Rocha, Grace Wales Bonner, and Martine Rose? Independence has been a key factor in their success.

Susanna: There has never been a better opportunity to be an independent designer in terms of getting visibility, but maintaining longevity is the issue right now because the whole retail infrastructure is difficult, even more so now with department stores struggling. So designers have to create their own channels. In terms of striking out as an independent, I think it is a good time to do that, but it's about the support you get. If you're talented and people notice you, people do cheerlead you, but maintaining that is the tricky part.

Over the past ten years, how has your rapport with the industry evolved?

Susanna: 'Rapport with the industry' – that's an interesting way of putting it! Does that mean how the industry treats us? Or is it how we interact with the rest of the industry?

Both. In terms of how the industry interacts with these monikers you've created, and how you respond? The advantages and disadvantages of building a profile.

'Because we created something ourselves, and we don't have a corporation behind us, we can survive on our own. Without their titles, who are *they*?'

Susanna: Bryan, I don't know how you feel about it, but I think we've become used to being lone rangers. Not that we don't care about how we're perceived within the industry.

Bryan: You're Susie Bubble; I'm Bryanboy. Those are the identities that we've created for ourselves. Do you feel there are privileges that come with that? Do we get treated differently because of our identities?

Susanna: For sure. At the beginning people took the piss out of us.

Bryan: For sure.

Susanna: Endlessly. Bitched about us in their cars. They were snide. Not even snide behind our backs. Snide to our faces! Come on!

Bryan: I know. It still happens to this day.

Susanna: The animosity that I've experienced. I don't know if the moniker rubbed them the wrong way. I think it was more that we came out of nowhere. Like suddenly, *les bloggeurs* were at the shows, taking up a seat that they might have gotten. I have gone past the point of caring about that. When you've had below-the-line comments on your own blog, you have to go past the point of caring. I have had everything under the sun. I take detailed criticism quite personally, like most people would, but I did take some things onboard and sometimes I do have to go back on things. I like it when people make me think about my own stance – I am not always right about everything! I mean, I would never say that I have the right view on things; I simply have *my* view. That is what conversation is about and I love a heated debate.

Bryan: I feel like because we created something ourselves and we do not have an institution, a corporation or outlet behind us, that we can survive on our own. Without their titles, who are *they*? We've seen the famous editors who created names for themselves but the moment that they were fired or let go they lost their clout.

Susanna: At the same time though, they do survive, they become bigger personalities. That's why I was saying, every time I get asked the silly, 'Oh, what do you think about the word "influencer"?' question, which is so terribly boring and tiresome, it's like, well, everyone is one…

Bryan: Everyone's a fucking influencer.

Susanna: The editor with 50,000 Instagram followers is an influencer. In fact, a lot of them now have the same modus operandi as a blogger or an influencer. You know, selfies, promoting themselves, projecting their own tastes.

Bryan: Making TikTok videos.

Susanna: Yeah, and getting paid partnerships. What is that if it's not influencing? Let's face it, a lot of them have done it.

Bryan: When you think about it, we're shills. We're all professional shills.

Susanna: This is what I continuously repeat. It doesn't matter if you're reviewing or whatever. You are in the business of selling something. The role of a magazine editor is not so different from the role of an influencer – it's just you have the pages to put your partnerships on.

Bryan: You're servicing a brand.

Susanna: By promoting their name, by talking about them, shooting them, styling them – whatever it is you're doing – you are helping a brand put stuff out there. They make new stuff for people to buy every season, for the 50 million seasons a year or wherever we are currently.

How have your roles and responsibilities evolved over the past decade? In what ways have your respective career arcs been indicative of broader shifts in the industry?

Susanna: Bryan's done the full cycle. What was it you said in your *Perfect* letter?

Bryan: The thing with me is that when I started, it was with a travel blog, and then it became a passion. Then of course, over time, the platforms have changed. We went from growing up on computers to now, when we are in a mobile-centric world where everything has to be image and video-based. With my trajectory, I just adapt with the times. Regardless of what platform it is, I want to make sure I'm on it. I'm early and I build an audience. The print side obviously came later in life because I felt bored doing stuff where I was front facing. I never had a traditional media background and have always been curious, just never really had a foot in the door. Then when Katie offered me the position, I thought, you know what, maybe it's a good creative challenge, so I accepted. By being fully immersed in the print world, I really have a clearer sense of how things are behind the scenes. It's very exciting.

Susanna: I started off in a magazine, in tandem with my blog and Instagram

'The editor with 50,000 Instagram followers – doing selfies, promoting themselves, and projecting their own tastes – is as much an influencer as us.'

and everything; you need to gain the biggest breadth of skills you can. I already had a foot in the door of traditional media. Although, I would say that *Dazed* was a bit of a forerunner. We were creating a website, which, at the time, magazines didn't really care about and now Dazed Digital is ahead of some of the other star titles, in London at least. I feel like your career is more aligned with the rise of different platforms; I've followed my instinct and what I want to do.
Bryan: You've always been true to yourself – you're a writer!
Susanna: I love writing and telling stories. Having the opportunity to interview designers, whether it be in written form or a podcast, is a personal interest of mine as opposed to an assignment.

'I taught myself HTML when I was 13; I'm a nerd. I'm really happy just teaching myself a new skill, downloading a new app, and figuring things out.'

Would you say that brands think like publishers nowadays? They want to create the content for themselves.
Susanna: Yes, the broader shift in the industry is that brands have become content creators themselves. They need feeding as much as our blogs did back in the day. They have essentially adopted a similar mentality of constantly needing content. Bryan, I don't know how many times you blogged a day but…
Bryan: Three or four times. The most annoying thing was long-form. When you think about it, you spend the whole day shooting, taking pictures, and then you go back home at night. It's really a luxury to post 20 pictures, write a thousand words.
Susanna: Loading up my SD card and then editing all the pictures. Carrying a DSLR. We were photographing, editing on Photoshop. We taught ourselves so much shit.
Bryan: Now we just take pictures on a fucking iPhone.
Susanna: During the pandemic, you were acing TikTok video editing like no other. This new class of content creators don't really get the dues they deserve. There's a real lack of respect and snobbishness about what's seen as jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none.
Bryan: I think so, but the current class of content creators…
Susanna: They have teams!
Bryan: Yeah. We didn't have teams; we had each other! Now that they have teams, how different are they from a traditional magazine? They have a stylist, a photographer, an art director…
Susanna: The only difference is that they are the face of everything, and they are operating their own media empire that can be more easily leveraged into a personal brand, which you've definitely done. Have you done collaborations?
Bryan: I've done Prada collaborations, but I don't have my own brand!
Susanna: I got asked that the other day by my hairdresser…
Bryan: Same! I'm always getting asked when I'm going to come up with something.
Susanna: He was like, 'But you're famous' and I was like, 'No, I'm not really.'
Bryan: Starting my own brand is not for me.
Susanna: It's not for me either.
Bryan: It's not for us.
Susanna: That's the one area that I would probably never go into.
Bryan: It's very bold.
Susanna: The personal brand empire. I just think that there's so much stuff out there; I don't know if I could add anything.
Bryan: And the pressure. You have to offer something new and have something to say. The pressure of coming up with stuff constantly. That would drive me mad.
Susanna: I have thought about doing little things.
Bryan: You wanted to have a cafe!
Susanna: No, I want a line of pastel stockings. I always want really cute knee-high stockings, but I can never find them. Maybe I'll just do something stupid and little like that. Something completely irrelevant.

What do you consider your best skills? What have you learned over the past decade?
Susanna: Good question. I do feel like we ask ourselves this all the time. You evolve. I love learning. I taught myself HTML when I was like 13; I'm a nerd, and I love it. I'm really happy with just trying to teach myself a new skill, download a new app, and figure things out. I'm not going to say that I have mastered a lot of everything but at least I give it a good go. You can but try!
Bryan: That's the thing, I feel like I never evolved. I'm always an entertainer, a storyteller.
Susanna: That's not true.
Bryan: The way I treat all the platforms at the moment is exactly how I treated my blog back in the day.
Susanna: I think, through video, you've gained confidence in your persona.
Bryan: It's the same persona I had with pictures! I used to be a hot mess. That's what I was known for. I love telling stories. I love entertaining people. I love provoking. Times have changed, the platforms have changed, but the messaging and the actor is still there. It's the same.
Susanna: Your skill is definitely engaging audiences and entertaining them as well. They could be totally uninterested in fashion and still love you. But at the same time, you've got that audience who are industry professionals and who are here for your content.
Bryan: And *you're* a terrific writer, a journalist. I've always called you my personal oracle of fashion. You love nurturing relationships with young talent. You are the queen of FOMO. You need to be there all the time.
Susanna: I'm everything, everywhere, all at once. The writing, the uploading onto CMS, the taking of pictures, the downloading of pictures, the editing of the pictures.
Bryan: And not many people do that!

'I used to be a hot mess. That's what I was known for. Times have changed, platforms have changed, but I still love provoking and entertaining people.'

It's not too different from putting a magazine together.
Susanna: Exactly! I loved *Dazed* because everything was within your control. I don't think I'm someone who does well directing a team; that's why I'm not a magazine editor. I like working within my own space. That's just my own personality. I don't do it for money, that's for sure.
Bryan: It's not about money; it's about having an eye everywhere. That's a great talent.
Susanna: It's still exciting to me to see the beginnings of things. Sometimes, it's more exciting than when you see them later on in their careers.

You both work for more conventional titles now, like BoF, *ES Magazine*, *Perfect*, going by your real names. Do you find that the traditions and customs behind fashion-media publications, and more specifically the role of fashion journalists, have opened up in recent years? Journalism and the definition of a critic feel both wider and more inclusive.
Susanna: Opened up? BoF has op-eds from a variety of people. Imran [Amed] was a blogger, so I think he's more embracing of voices that have something to say, whether they're a journalist or not. I would say yes because, you know, what is a traditional fashion journalist? I know a lot of writers who didn't study fashion journalism; I didn't. The way that fashion journalism operates is still very much by the book. You know, you get commissioned, you have a word count, you have a rate. You write and then that's whipped into shape by the editor or whatever, so the process hasn't really changed that much. At *Perfect*, do you feel like things are by the book?
Bryan: No, definitely not. Also, what does by the book even mean? *Perfect* is so different compared to everywhere else. Sure, we always have an editorial meeting where we discuss what we'd love to do in the next issue, and everyone has an input. Everyone can be a critic. How do you define a critic anyway? Are you a critic because you have a TikTok account and you criticize the clothes just by watching the shows? Or are you a traditional critic like Vanessa Friedman or Cathy Horyn? Sure, everyone can say something about fashion nowadays because of the platforms available, but how do you define what a critic is?
Susanna: Fashion has embraced this newer wave of fashion critics, the HauteLeMode and those types.
Bryan: Is it criticism as entertainment?
Susanna: It is! Maybe a Cathy Horyn or a Vanessa Friedman wouldn't view that as fashion-critic work. They wouldn't look at Stylenotcom's account and think this is a fashion critic.
Bryan: What's fascinating about when we first came out, all the news headlines were 'bloggers are the new critics', 'bloggers are the new journalists'.
Susanna: Yeah! Except we never claimed to be.
Bryan: No! It's their fault. They pigeonholed us into something that we weren't and aren't.
Susanna: They created this print-versus-digital dynamic.
Bryan: Yes, which is very poor. I am not a critic; I've never considered myself a critic, and it's fascinating when our audience is like, 'When are you going to write about this and what is your opinion on this?' I serve as a cheerleader for the industry. I love championing people I love; I love championing talent. I'm not out there to criticize.

Are your commitments to the talent, or at least the reader, not the consumer or the wider industry?
Susanna: Definitely. I would say that I'm more of a cheerleader, too. It's better to celebrate than to constantly pick at the scabs of what's bad in

the industry, and there are many poor things. Yet both of us speak up when we feel strongly about something. We've both got into hot water…

Bryan: Many times!

Susanna: Many times for speaking up. It always feels very organic. It's not strategic when we do it; it's like verbal diarrhoea.

Can you give me an example?

Susanna: When Chanel did that feminist-protest show, that was the first time I really went out on a limb, and I was quite scared of them rescinding invitations, but I think they said that they appreciated the criticism. When you weigh in on things like Kanye's 'White Lives Matter' T-shirt, that will inevitably lead to debate. Then during the pandemic when Michel Gaubert attended a party that featured these weird masks with Chinese slanted eyes on, like Asian eyes, I did go off on one with that. Then afterwards we had a dialogue privately about it, and we learned, he learned, and it was a rare moment of acceptance and embrace. It's those private moments that make progress in these discussions; it's not just about creating drama online. That is between him and I.

Bryan: We're driven by what's going on; we're triggered by what's happening – but again, it is not our job.

Susanna: No, but at the same time, I feel like we've become more confident in speaking up.

Bryan: When it's warranted.

Susanna: And maybe that newer class of influencer is a bit more passive.

Fashion has not been able to avoid cancel culture, although perhaps less permanent in its potency and effect compared to other industries. What effects do you see this having on designers, brands, media and individuals who work in fashion?

Susanna: I wrote about the anatomy of a fashion scandal.[3] It is almost like the industry courts controversy and that isn't anything new. There are very few things that keep a brand cancelled. There's a bigger mechanism for the apology and the 'make-good process', but everyone has a very short-term memory so ultimately everything is forgotten.

Bryan: No one can really be cancelled because a lot of these brands have money behind them. People move on, continue what they're doing and then they'll pay everyone, you know. What I do like about this whole movement, when you think about the early 2000s compared to now, is it really serves as a check and balance to a lot of what's going on in the industry. If we didn't have cancel culture, we would never have heard of the things that were alleged to have happened with Bruce Weber or Mario Testino.

Susanna: There are people within brands now who are checking this stuff; they're much more stringent and I think that's a positive thing.

Bryan: Even with the range of models we had growing up. I never saw anyone who looked like me. Fashion has never been so diverse.

Susanna: Sure, you could call it representation by checkbox.

Bryan: Performative is better than nothing.

Susanna: When we criticize quotas as performative, is it better than ignorance?

Bryan: It's a lesser evil, whether it comes from a pure place, at least there's progress.

Susanna: One can only hope that the next generation of designers will change the industry. Those changes don't come fast, but they'll bring a different set of eyeballs with a different world view.

Bryan: Fashion has never been more global, more seen. People look into everything now and there's no room for mistakes.

Susanna: If you make a mistake it will blow up and I think that is a good thing when the evidence is there. Sometimes some of the things that are reported are misguided. Stories can get blown out of proportion, like the reporting around the Balenciaga scandal. That was very convoluted, and people were getting the wrong end of the stick. We need to be more mindful of how these things can blow up and what we put out there.

Bryan: What's fascinating for me is when some of the brands are saying we're inclusive, we're diverse, and then they have their all-white atelier taking a bow, not a single person of colour on the design team.

Susanna: Those kinds of culture changes take a long time to shift. I don't know if those things are purposeful, but changes are coming. You can criticize cancel culture, but it opens up the conversation.

> **'When we started, we never set out with the goal of becoming a professional shill. There was no template. No one was doing this back in the day.'**

A few years ago, Cathy Horyn wrote: 'There's a danger in reading too much into the fashion choices of a person, particularly a public figure.' Would you argue that today, on the contrary, it seems more important than ever to be examining these things?

Bryan: My personal relationship with fashion is a reflection of where I am in my life. I never really felt a need to change. When I wear clothes, I wear them because they're authentic to me. I mean, I'm 41; I love Chanel and Hermès. It's different to when I was 25 and I couldn't afford either. Fashion is a reflection of who we are at any given time or moment, and the beauty of fashion is that you can express yourself creatively. It doesn't need to be strategized because of where you are in your professional career.

Susanna: Honestly, I've never thought to do that. And maybe that is to my detriment actually because I remember someone told me that designers would take me more seriously as a journalist if I dressed down.

Bryan: What? In all black?

Susanna: Yeah. Someone actually did say that to me once. And it hurt, of course. To ask me to dress in an all-black suit. I would feel so uncomfortable; I'd rather walk around in a bikini.

As early influencers and bloggers, have you been strategic in how you've evolved, as social media itself continues to evolve?

Susanna: When Instagram started, it really set the pace for paid partnerships and so you had the traditional influencer whose sole role is to sell stuff through paid posts. Today the title is a bit more blurred. It means everything and nothing at the same time.

Bryan: You could be a dog and have something like 3,000 followers. A doggy influencer.

Susanna: Essentially, it's promoting things for people to buy.

Bryan: So, that's what you think an influencer is today?

Susanna: Well, that makes me sound very cynical, doesn't it? We should just call a spade a spade. We're in the business of selling new things, and there's a myriad of ways to do that.

Bryan: There's also influencers who refuse to sell anything or those who don't get paid.

Susanna: That's true.

Bryan: Anyone with an audience can be an influencer. When we started, we never set out with the goal of becoming a professional shill like, 'I want to get into advertising, you know.' There was no template. No one was doing this back in the day. We did not set out to get paid.

Susanna: I already had a well-paid job in advertising; I just did it on the side. Before work, after work, in my lunch hour. It was like, 'Oh, I really like fashion, but I didn't study it and I don't feel comfortable going into the industry, but I do this side thing that I can dip in and out of and have fun.' It was a hobby, really.

Bryan: It was like an outlet. A storytelling outlet where I would just talk about what happened in my day or I would scan magazines and share my opinions. It was a hobby.

Susanna: When I started my blog, I didn't see the kind of content that I wanted to read about so I created it myself. I would go and see small designers that no one was covering and do stupid outfit pictures. It was the beginning of the selfie era.

Bryan: Now my 13-year-old niece is telling me that she wants to become an influencer. When you hear the word you immediately think, 'Oh, you can make a livelihood from that.'

Susanna: Free stuff! Loads of trips! Glamorous!

Has the arrival of new media such as TikTok turned digital-media publicists at fashion houses into gatekeepers to the younger generations of influencers?

Bryan: A lot of the kids nowadays would never be able to go to a fashion show. Imagine how you and I have fought for our seats at the table.

Susanna: That's true! Remember when the TikTok kids turned up a year ago.

Bryan: And they're all front row now! See. This is where we start to sound like traditional media.

Susanna: I've embraced it. I remember we were looking at some TikTok kids in the front row and I was wondering whether they looked at us the way that we used to look at Tim [Blanks] or Sarah Mower. I remember asking you, 'I wonder if they're scared of us?' And you were like, 'Nah! They don't even know who we are!'

Now you feel like the 'old guard'?

Bryan: I think influencers today have a fast track compared to our generation.

Susanna: They have ingratiated their way into the industry; they have an allocation now. At every PR agency, it's digital first.

Bryan: For most brands!

Susanna: Social-media managers. Those are jobs that didn't even exist when we were coming up. A whole other industry's spawned up.

> **'My highest-engagement video of this last season was the Coperni robots, even though I actually didn't really love the clothes.'**

Do you feel that there's a greater sense of segregation between influencers and other industry roles, with 'influencer zones' at the shows in Paris, and notably at Gucci's Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 show in Milan?
Susanna: It's always been there. When I was digital editor of Dazed, I would always get put in a digital section. What you have now is that brands have realized that editors' needs are different to influencers', so they'll have influencer-specific trips, influencer-specific seating…
Bryan: Are you noticing that there are more influencers now than traditional media?
Susanna: No. There aren't more – they're just more visible, that's all.
Bryan: Most magazines are digital-first now.

> **'We were looking at the TikTok kids on the front row, wondering whether they looked at us the way we used to look at Tim Blanks or Sarah Mower.'**

Susanna: Traditional ad spend has definitely gone down. That's why magazines have reduced the number of issues. Most have turned their attention to digital. It's swings and roundabouts.

We've seen fashion become increasingly politicized over the past decade. What do you make of fashion's relationship with politics and society? Should fashion's appeal transcend politics and the political beliefs of the wearer?
Susanna: Of course! But does it need to wade in on politics? That I don't know. Does everyone have the capacity to do that?
Bryan: It boils down to this obsession with relevance and headlines. Fashion uses current affairs to be part of the conversation or as a reaction to what's going on. If you ask me, I'd rather see a collection that's beautiful and pure that doesn't wade into what's out there.
Susanna: This goes back to what I was saying about brands as content creators – 24-hour fashion news cycles didn't exist 30 years ago. Brands constantly feel like they need something to talk about or something to announce so that's why they do a charity tie-up, or a collaboration with an artist or activist. Those kind of things signal that a brand wants to be part of a wider media agenda. It's marketing more than altruism.

How do you feel about the shifting dynamic between fashion, celebrity culture and entertainment?
Bryan: Well, fashion has become entertainment.
Susanna: The relationship between celebrity and fashion has always been there. Like red carpets…
Bryan: It all started when Anna Wintour started at American *Vogue*. Celebrity was her main agenda.
Susanna: This might be controversial but I remember there were a lot of people on the Fashion Spot forum complaining when celebrities started being used in campaigns instead of models.
Bryan: That's antiquated discourse. When you think about it now, brands are bigger than they were before. Louis Vuitton was like a €2-billion brand in 2003, now it's €20 billion. In a way, these brands have become bigger than Cadbury or Colgate. They need that mass appeal, that machinery, to sustain this level of growth.
Susanna: And in order to attract maximum eyeballs, you need to align with the *biggest* stars, not just *a* star.
Bryan: Look at Lionel Messi at Louis Vuitton.
Susanna: Messi is beyond fashion.

What is it about these brands that make them beacons of quality?
Susanna: What they're selling are obviously the values of craftsmanship and heritage. That is very much what their brand value is trading on. But also, cultural significance. So when Vuitton does a collab with Yayoi Kusama, they communicate around that cultural weight. It's a lot of different things, whether you believe that value is rightly attributed is up to you. But for now, they're winning in terms of the way they communicate values of longevity, history, craftsmanship, and creativity. I still love a lot of Nicolas Ghesquière's work at Vuitton; it's still very important for me. It's very design-led; I'm still a fan. They have put their belief in that as a company, so all of that is communicated and they've been able to leverage all of that into growth and sales.

At Balenciaga's last show, Demna's show notes stated: 'Fashion has become a kind of entertainment, but often that overshadows the essence of it, which lays in shapes and volumes and silhouettes.' What are your thoughts on the spectacle of fashion overpowering the clothes and the collection?
Susanna: I'm very clothes first. I couldn't give a shit about the 'fash-tainment' element. Cynically speaking, it's great for eyeballs; it's great for traction. You get a great video of a mental show and put it up, of course your engagement goes nuts. My highest-engagement video of last season was the Coperni robots, even though I actually didn't really love the clothes.
Bryan: We went from using celebrities to designers trying to create viral moments.
Susanna: It's the designers who have decided that a moment or a viral aspect or 'fash-tainment' works for them.
Bryan: A lot of these designers were doing that before the word 'viral' had even been invented. Look at the Chanel sets when Karl Lagerfeld was there. Look at McQueen and Shalom Harlow.
Susanna: A public-participation element actually lays it bare to more criticism. My video was going viral but there were also lots of critical comments on it. It's a risk. You want to have that 'fashtainment' moment, but do you want pure eyes or do you want people saying, 'I love this and therefore I will buy this dress?' Isn't the point to love it, then buy the dress? So if you're doing that and all you're getting is someone going 'Ooh, look at this funny robot'…
Bryan: A lot of it is just noise.
Susanna: I don't mind noise as long as it's backed up by something solid.

When did fashion become part of pop culture? When did pop culture become fashionable?
Susanna: Hasn't it always been thus?
Bryan: I do feel that fashion became pop culture the moment that brands became megabrands. The moment that brands became bigger than celebrities. Fashion is pop culture.
Susanna: It's not even pop culture. We're talking about household names that are interwoven into the fabric of day-to-day life. We're so used to living with brands and names that people won't even be able to recall what Prada's aesthetic is. Like, who's Raf Simons or whoever? But they will know the brand name. Those brands are flexes. It went from luxury aspirational to now being able to go to the Prada Caffè at Harrods and have a £10 cake.
Bryan: They're like £15! And Dior cookies are even more…
Susanna: What I mean is that brands have built out the lifestyle aspect so much that it just becomes every day. What was your TikTok tagline?
Bryan: It was: 'Elevating everyday experiences.'
Susanna: That's what brands do now.
Bryan: They've gone from luxury, aspiration and fashion to really becoming lifestyle brands. Dior Maison has plates, place mats, tennis rackets. There are Chanel surfboards!
Susanna: Are we just going back to the eighties when brands had weird licenses like Yves Saint Laurent cigarettes and stuff? I mean, Saint Laurent is now the producer of this Pedro Almodóvar film, so they're getting into film and entertainment now.[4] The way fashion is touching people is not just through a bag, a magazine or a blogger. That's why fashion is so omnipresent that everyone on the street will be able to identify something.
Bryan: The notion that fashion needs to be really exclusive and rare, that verified couture perception of fashion is antiquated.
Susanna: It's got to be about the level of success you want to obtain. Do we all need to be a megabrand, a mega-celebrity?
Bryan: It's not for everybody. Look at Rei Kawakubo at Comme or Azzedine Alaïa. He refused to be part of this machine.
Susanna: I'm not as interested in the pop-culture aspect; I'm shit at recognizing celebrities.
Bryan: Brands have become bigger than the celebrities.
Susanna: I just look at the clothes.
Bryan: Clothes first.
Susanna: Yes, please, clothes first.

[1] Before the internet made access to visuals of fashion collections a click away, *Collezione* was one of the few ways to see all the looks for each season by designer, with each issue providing a lookbook of the shows. The magazine today publishes seven editions: *Donna*, *Haute Couture & Sposa*, *Sport & Street*, *Accessori*, *Uomo*, *Bambini*, and *Trends*.

[2] Website The Fashion Spot has a thriving community of forums about subjects including personal style, star style, fashion history, vintage ads and magazines, and photography. In early June 2023, the forum had 81,721 members and was home to 207,380 discussions and 15,067,201 messages.

[3] Lau's article 'Fashion Is a Historically Controversial Industry – Will Cancel Culture Put an End to That?' was published in *ES Magazine* on 16 February 2023.

[4] Saint Laurent Productions premiered its first release, *Strange Way of Life*, at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival. Directed by Pedro Almodóvar, the 31-minute film starred Ethan Hawke and Pedro Pascal as two cowboys who meet up after 25 years to thrash out their feelings for each other. Upcoming productions from the company include films by David Cronenberg and Paolo Sorrentino, which will both feature costumes designed by Saint Laurent creative director Anthony Vaccarello. He told the press that he wants 'to work with and provide a space for all the great film talents who have inspired me over the years'.

Angelo Flaccavento & Alexander Fury

Interview by Jonathan Wingfield

‘There is a great Somerset Maugham quote I use: ‘People ask you for criticism, but they only want praise.’ But I’d add to that – and I think I can say this as we are both fashion critics – that the last ten years has proven the sheer impotence of the fashion critic. Hedi’s Saint Laurent was a great example of that. Fashion critics initially *loathed* it – it got critically drubbed – and yet it became the best-selling thing in fashion.’

'Ideologically, I think people see Angelo and me as purists,' says British writer and fashion critic Alexander Fury, referring to the steely, no-bullshit reputation that he and his Italian counterpart Angelo Flaccavento have carved out for themselves. Both men are passionate, highly knowledgeable (to the point of shameless geekdom in Fury's case), and deeply committed to *actual* fashion design – and designers – in an industry increasingly defined by the dark arts of branding. In an era in which cheerleading has all but usurped criticism, Flaccavento and Fury possess that rarest of qualities: the ability to bring genuine context and authority to an outspoken opinion.

Both cover the seasonal shows for financial newspapers of record in their respective countries – Fury for the *Financial Times*, Flaccavento for *Il Sole 24 Ore* – as well as contributing to myriad respected magazines. Flaccavento also writes notoriously 'to-the-point' fashion-week wrap-up missives for the Business of Fashion, while Fury doubles-up as fashion features director for *Another* magazine. Both, too, are authors, ghostwriters, and consultants; Fury is a respected curator and obsessive fashion-archives collector (think Galliano, Alaïa, Lacroix couture and Westwood crammed into a London storage unit), while Flaccavento is an exhibited artist. In short, theirs are the kind of multi-hyphenate careers your average DJ-slash-art director could only 'curate' on Tumblr. (As an additional aside of note, it's also worth checking out Fury's Instagram Stories, if only to discover the altogether campier and more self-deprecating facet of his off-duty personality, where unwavering devotion to Galliano gowns is coupled with faux-bitchy captions: 'Madame Alexander Fury's rainy day outfit – the look she'll wear the days she has to get the Tube and doesn't want to sit next to any basic peasants' or 'Beyond. Madame Alexander Fury is selling her Andalusian oil fields and a number of El Grecos of dubious provenance to finance a Valentino spending spree.')

Couture-client cosplaying aside, what both Flaccavento and Fury offer best is a genuine understanding and analysis of fashion – from historical references to the technical construction of clothes, as well as the necessary task of shining a light on the often-opaque machinations of the industry's corporate operations. What each delivers is the type of unrivalled fashion criticism that requires designers to bring their A-game, because woe betide the handsomely remunerated creative director of a major Parisian powerhouse who dares to send a lacklustre or predictable collection down the catwalk.

Flaccavento and Fury both began attending Paris Fashion Week towards the end of the 2000s, their respective pathways towards fashion's upper echelons coinciding with the arrival in the industry of smartphones, social media, selfies, megabrands, Kim and Kanye, cancel culture, cruise shows, greenwashing, going viral, sportswear, streetwear, TikTok, K-Pop, podcasts, NFTs, and clickbait, right up to the announcement, this spring, that LVMH boss Bernard Arnault had become the wealthiest individual in the world. Generous with their time, and robust of opinion, Flaccavento and Fury sat down with *System* not once but twice – firstly, on the final afternoon of Paris Fashion Week; and a second time, a month later in London, once the dust had settled on the Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 season – to cast an expert eye over the past decade and tell it like it is.

'It's been an era of overload. Too much fashion; films are too long; people have too much silicon injected into their bodies. Everything's done to excess.'

Paris and London,
7 March and 4 April 2023

Jonathan Wingfield: I'd like to begin with a passage from the note that Demna wrote at the Balenciaga show last week: 'Fashion has become a kind of entertainment, but often that part overshadows the essence of it, which lays in shapes, volumes and silhouettes, and the way clothes have an ability to change us.' The Balenciaga context was pretty singular, but generally speaking, it feels like fashion really *has* become entertainment. What effect is this having?

Angelo Flaccavento: What I'll remember most from this week in Paris is the sound of kids screaming outside the shows. I never know why they're screaming, although that's probably because I'm disconnected from TikTok, K-Pop, rock stars, and so on.

Alexander Fury: It's like that scene from *In Bed with Madonna* when she goes to the hotel window, and you hear all these screams. You go past the Crillon or the Ritz this week and there are crowds of kids outside, and all I can think is, why are you not in school? You know, 20 or 30 years ago, you'd get Gaultier or Galliano groupies turning up desperately trying to get into the shows, but these days the crowds just seem content to watch people walking in and out; they don't seem too concerned about the clothes.

Angelo: What we consider 'the clothes' during fashion week have gotten muddled up with the increasingly outlandish looks that people are wearing outside the shows. Which of course has less to do with fashion or style or clothes, and more about 'look at me, take my picture'. I saw someone wearing a lion suit outside the Margiela show! I mean, it was a cold day, but it was just all about them getting their picture taken.

'I always used to say, 'Fashion week is a glorified trade show; it's not about entertainment.' But Demna's right, that's exactly what it's become.'

Alexander: Demna is right – fashion *has* become entertainment, even though as an industry I think we've been resisting it for a long time. People used to ask me about it and I'd always say, 'No, fashion week is a glorified trade show, like a car show; you go there to look at the clothes and it shouldn't be entertainment.' But of course that's exactly what it's become. As a result, fashion is everywhere, its profile has been raised. These days, taxi drivers in Paris know when it's fashion week, not just because industry people are taking cabs but because you can feel the vibrations of fashion across the whole city.

In *System*'s debut issue, 10 years ago, Nicolas Ghesquière said: 'I sometimes fear that what is happening outside the shows might eclipse what is happening inside.' Do you think the peripheral noise has altered how designers approach their collections and shows?

Angelo: I was talking with a PR the other day who said that some designers actually *want* that chaos outside their show; they engineer it by posting the venue location the day before.

Alexander: I think this season has actually been something of a reaction *against* all of that. You can almost sense that it's been intentionally boring on the catwalk, with lots of black or brown suits. During New York this season, there was all that hype about those huge red [MSCHF] boots – [laughs] this interview is going to date so quickly! I was looking at them, thinking, 'This is literally the death of fashion.' It's like those virtual clothes that you add to pictures of yourself online; it's everything I loathe. There is zero interaction with a physical garment, which, for someone like me who spends *all* his money on clothes, is just wrong. If you've only seen a piece of clothing in pictures, then to touch it with your hands or wear it on the body changes *everything*. Everyone knows about my Galliano obsession, but you pick up those Edwardian-looking evening dresses, and they can just be slipped on like a T-shirt. That is about the pure grit of their design, which to me is mind-blowing. So to go back to this season, it feels like it's been about real clothes – like that Saint Laurent quote: 'It's about clothes that have a kind of silence to them.' When even the Balmain show is smaller and the clothes are relatively quiet, it signals a sea change, which is very interesting. That's all a reaction to the hullabaloo going on outside the shows, which, I should add, I find quite physically threatening a lot of the time.

Does it feel like we're coming out of one decade of fashion and moving towards a new one?

Alexander: It does, but after everything we've been through, it feels like change tinged with trepidation. It takes a few years before a decade gets going, before it establishes what it'll ultimately be remembered for. Vetements only emerged in 2014 with that oversized silhouette, but the 2010s will ultimately be remembered for that: everything sloping off the shoulders and being too big. But this season, I really feel like we are pulling it back on, the silhouette is narrower, things are being pulled down, hemlines are dropping, which historically has meant that bad times are coming. I've just written a piece for the *FT* about how I think the silhouette is changing in quite a significant way. That elongated silhouette is everywhere, but the Saint Laurent men's show in January was the most precise iteration of it. I'm not saying now is the equivalent of a Dior 1947 moment, but it is a new silhouette and I think [Anthony] Vaccarello did it best.

If today is narrower silhouettes and dropping hemlines, how would you best define this past decade?

Alexander: Excess!

Angelo: And overload.

Alexander: Overload, overproduction, an era of too much. There is too much fashion; films are too long; people have too much silicon injected into their bodies. Clothes are body-conscious and curvy because everything is so sexualized. Just everything taken to excessive levels. I was working on that Valentino exhibition,[1] which included a room full of red Valentino dresses from different eras. It was interesting looking at a big red dress by Mr Valentino from the late seventies and then a recent big red dress from Pierpaolo. Pierpaolo's was twice as big because today a big dress has to be much bigger. I went to see Gaultier couture the other day and in the salon there was a dress from Spring/Summer 2000, which, in my mind's eye, was this enormous thing, but it actually is quite restrained by today's standards. *Everything* has to be bigger now to register. And fashion is defined by people demanding more: more clothes, more shows, more clothes in more shows…

Angelo: The same can be said for styling in this decade; it has been all about accumulation, about putting more stuff on.

Alexander: Alessandro [Michele] at Gucci was total maximalism. He did it very well, but when you look at a lot of other houses, it's just piles upon piles of crap. The more we put on, the more we can strip off and sell. If an outfit has 47 different things to it, then that's 47 different bits of merch we can sell.

Angelo: This season did feel more rigorous and stripped back, less about that accumulation of different pieces to each look, although the shift felt a bit contrived. It's like, there's been this period of excess, so now let's strip it right back to some kind of reactionary minimalism. It just didn't feel very organic to me.

A kind of kitsch minimalism.

Angelo: Exactly, kitsch minimalism. As Alex says, this season was all about black pant suits, but how many of those can you have? There didn't seem to be much thinking behind these shifts. On the other hand, multiplicity was still the order of the day at Bottega [Veneta] in Milan. Each look was totally different from the others, so they called it 'the story of an Italian piazza', with this idea of many different people in one place.[2] It was kind of a clever way of saving a very disparate collection from looking like a broken puzzle, by giving it a narrative, even though the multiplicity was there to maximize commercial gain.

Alexander: The more-ness is about satisfying more markets. So if someone comes in and has £200 in their pocket, then brands want them to be able to buy something, which is great in a way because it is democratic. I remember going into shops when I was a teenager and desperately wanting to buy a piece of the dream.

'I saw someone wearing a lion suit outside the Margiela show! I mean, it was a cold day, but it was just all about them getting their picture taken.'

What was entry level for you at that age?

Alexander: Late nineties John Galliano at Dior. I had about £150, so I could buy a sweater, but not one with sleeves. So, I got this weird sleeveless sweater, which I still have somewhere, because that was all I could afford. I literally wanted to buy into the dream of John, of Dior, of fashion. I don't know if people have that urge any more. I feel like it used to be more difficult to access; it was pre-internet and there was very little about fashion on television or in newspapers. As a kid, you really had to seek it out.

People say that about most cultural niches pre-internet.

Alexander: Pre-internet, I never knew when fashion week was happening; all of a sudden there would be a photo in a newspaper and I was like, right, I need to buy *every* newspaper! Then feeling disappointed if the same look appeared in two different newspapers, because instead of seeing four looks from the collection you only got to see three. Today, of course, fashion is *everywhere*, and open to everybody.

Is that a good thing? Around the time that Raf left Dior in 2015, he told *System*: 'Fashion became pop. And I don't know if one should be ashamed or not to admit that maybe it was nicer when it was more elitist.'

Alexander: Fashion is incredibly democratic, which I think is a great thing. I come from a family of working-class northerners who had no idea what I was talking about. But through occasional newspaper stories I could discover and fall completely in love with those Galliano things, even if I couldn't afford them. Falling down the rabbit hole of fashion has never been so easy as it is now, so I think there are far more people exposed to it, more people genuinely interested in it, and probably more hardcore obsessives.

You're not inclined to agree with Raf?

Alexander: Well, of course, with that mass appeal comes the sense that fashion is less aspirational now – it is more attainable; there are different product levels that people can access. I walk past pubs in London and see guys wearing Balenciaga T-shirts. When would that have happened before?

What do you think they're buying into?

Angelo: Presumably something they've seen on social media, whether that's via e-commerce or via the hype of people they admire. They're not buying into the brand itself – Cristóbal [Balenciaga] doesn't mean anything to them – but what they see famous people wearing, all projected via flat imagery on screens. It's as if Instagram and fashion were made for one another.

Would you say the rise of social media has led designers to design increasingly with 2D imagery in mind?

Angelo: There was a moment in the middle of this past decade when everything seemed very flat, frontal, and looked great on Instagram or Vogue Runway. It's worth adding, very few designers actually draw by hand any more, and they drape very rarely. Most use AutoCAD, a tool that engineers use, and which makes everything appear flat, whereas for me the beauty of fashion comes from clothes moving on the body as the body moves. So, you tend to notice when designers are still actually dressmakers or continue to work closely with pattern cutters, because you see the dresses sweeping on the body. And then there are the designers who, subconsciously or otherwise, think of the flat 2D image as the end goal. I am not saying this to diminish his work, but while Nicolas Ghesquière's Vuitton collections look really good in pictures, I find they move quite badly on the catwalk because everything seems so stiff, almost like they're characters who've stepped out of a Nintendo game.

Alexander: Same with that show Ghesquière did with the flowers when he was at Balenciaga [Spring/Summer 2008].

Angelo: It makes me think that designers are perhaps afraid, which results in everything just becoming these little picture-perfect Instagram squares. But mistakes can be beautiful; sometimes shit happens on the catwalk, which can be a wonderful reminder that life is not perfect. This might also explain why the influence of Martin Margiela – the original one – has diminished a little over the past decade. He was the first designer to bring life into clothing and acknowledge that a skirt lining can be just as beautiful as a couture skirt, and that if things fall apart, they are no less appealing. The dynamic that governs these things is deeply human; it's the fear of death or imperfection. For some designers these days the dress has to be frozen in a perfect picture, as if they cannot bear to acknowledge that everything crumbles, everything decays.

Rick Owens' beauty in imperfection comes to mind.

Angelo: Conversely, Rick doesn't look good in pictures at all, but is always amazing in real life in the show, in movement.

Alexander: Rick drapes; he really works in three dimensions.

Angelo: And you can see that. This season, those big 'doughnut dresses' were wonderful on the catwalk, whereas in pictures they can look like you've just taken a pillow from the sofa and wrapped it around yourself. The point I'm trying to make is that pictures and videos are of course useful to us because they recall memories, but the show as an experience, with its sense of movement and flow, is something you have to witness first hand. It is unbeatable – and it really puts me in the mood to write.

Alexander: In New York, Proenza [Schouler] was great but again you needed to physically be there to see the way things moved; when the models turned, pleats broke apart to show prints or embroideries under slits or the body – different details were revealed to you. It's really good when a flat image *can't* convey that stuff; it's more of a challenge.

Angelo: Similarly, The Row was a beautiful show for me, but what really made the difference was that you had a particular kind of style – very proper, rich, white, uptown New York lady, wearing almost nun-like clothes – presented in a kind of mansion setting, and with this wildly incongruous soundtrack of 'Bela Lugosi's Dead' by Bauhaus. As soon as I heard the opening notes, I was in a good mood, because it created a really interesting friction. That sensory collision – the music, the spatial awareness – doesn't translate into a Vogue Runway picture. I remember a few years ago having a conversation with Alexandre Samson, the curator at the Musée Galliera, who told me that he'd done a show specifically about the back of clothing.[3] He'd been inspired by something I wrote, which was basically, 'If designers want to be inventive, and don't want to get copied, they should focus on designing the back of clothing, because everything is only ever being seen from the front.' It comes back to the limitations of 2D imagery; it feels less concerned with actually trying to identify with the woman.

You're saying it's about the rapport between the designer and the woman for whom they're designing?

Angelo: Absolutely, that's crucial. Because some designers' collections – and it's usually male designers – increasingly come across as just fantasy.

'There was all that hype in New York about those huge red boots. I was looking at them, thinking, 'This is literally the death of fashion.''

Female designers are obviously closer to women, as wearers of women's clothing themselves, and you can sense that. What is interesting to me about The Row is that of course they are pillaging menswear – like from Yohji or Jil Sander – but there is a softness to the way they do it. The fantasy and reality are nicely balanced at The Row, whereas I find men designing womenswear can easily get carried away with only the fantasy of the women they want to be dressing. It's often invention and unrealistic.

Alexander: The thing that has always impressed me when I speak to Maria Grazia [Chiuri], is how she absolutely knows the market and the customers. When someone asked her last year if miniskirts are really for the Dior customer, she was like, ‘Of course, but they're going to be 80 centimetres in length for the European market and 60 centimetres for the Asian market because of the differing body types.' She really does know her role as a designer of clothes, and how all of this will be disseminated; making clothes that will go into a shop and sell and be worn by women. It seems so base level, but you'd be surprised how few designers know this stuff.

> **‘The silhouette is narrower this season; things are being pulled down, hemlines are dropping, which historically has meant that bad times are coming.'**

Angelo: It makes me think again about what Demna wrote. Fashion as entertainment is here to stay, but I find that the entertainment part is so often disconnected from the collection itself – from the actual designing of clothes – so there's this whole entirely separate machine that's just there to generate online content. Theatrics have long been central to fashion, with the likes of McQueen and Galliano and so on, but their theatrics were integral to the narrative of their collections.

Alexander: I think it's telling that Demna wrote that, because the collections and sets he's designed for Balenciaga have themselves been disconnected at times. When someone's walking through a mud pit or the apocalypse dressed in an evening gown, you find yourself asking what the connection is. Although that Balenciaga ‘red carpet' [Summer 2022] show was all tied together so brilliantly.

Angelo: Absolutely. The vision of that ‘apocalypse' show [Autumn/Winter 2020-2021] was very lyrical. The show served the collection, whereas the one in the mud just went too far; I felt it lacked any subtlety.

Alexander: Yes, the ‘apocalypse' show really blew me away. I loved what Cathy Horyn wrote about it: ‘At one point I was looking at this and thinking, "Should I even be watching this?"' She's right, it is kind of like watching a horror movie; they are acting within this scenario. But because of his life experience, Demna is the only designer who could do that. It gives the whole thing genuine meaning, and it's what makes it extraordinary as a fashion experience. But do I remember any clothes from it? Apart from a blue evening dress and the trash bag, no, I don't. Whereas when I think back to those McQueen and Galliano shows, or Karl's shows at Chanel with the big sets, like the huge iceberg, I remember *exactly* what the models were carrying, I remember the shoes and the bags.

When did you start coming to the shows in Paris?

Angelo: My first season was October 2006. At the time I was writing for this free-press magazine that asked me to write wrap-up pieces about fashion week. At that point, I'd been around enough, and felt Milano was too restricting, so I needed to get to Paris. I wanted to see fashion with a capital F, so to speak. The first show I saw was Gaspard Yurkievich in the Espace Pierre Cardin, that little theatre behind the Champs-Élysées. This was pre-iPhone and I remember walking around with a printed map, feeling wide-eyed in the middle of the fashion dream. Probably like *Emily in Paris*, if I knew what that actually meant. What about you, Alex?

Alexander: My first Paris show was Stella McCartney on 28 February 2008, making this my 15th year. I remember taking the first Eurostar in the morning, going straight to the venue, and being frogmarched in by Susannah Frankel and Penny Martin.[4] I was smuggled into Saint Laurent, too. People said to me, if you've got a person with a ticket either side of you, you can get into the Chanel show, you just need to front it. That would *never* happen now.

Angelo: If I look back, I used to have so much time for myself, just wandering through the Marais, going to the showrooms or into shops simply because I liked the look of the window. It was a time for research, whereas now there's only time for shows.

Alexander: It was already busy when I started going, but then the week filled up, and then it got shorter but just as intense. They're like a breathing organism, these fashion weeks. I've just calculated that today is day 46 of the season. Did you do New York?

Angelo: I didn't, but I never count the days. I just go with the flow.

Alexander: I started in January in Florence, then Milan, Paris, couture, Alaïa, 11 days off, then New York, London, Milan, and now we're here on the final day of Paris, with just Miu Miu left. So today is day 46. It's fucking exhausting just thinking about it.

What do you find yourself doing at shows today that you weren't doing a decade ago?

Alexander: We all film the finale and then it's like, why am I actually filming this? Who is it for?

Angelo: And it is always bad quality anyway.

Alexander: I have just been to the *1997* exhibition[5] at the Musée Galliera, which has all these videos of the shows from that year. I went with someone who is a bit younger than me, and she said, ‘Wow, they're clapping individual outfits, not just the finale!' Which, of course, no one does any more because everyone has their phone in their hands, desperately filming. These days, you still feel that same impulse to want to acknowledge an amazing look, but the reaction now is to record it, not applaud it.

Isn't that impulse to document just everyday life now?

Alexander: Yes, I'll go to a restaurant – nothing to do with fashion week – and someone is positioning their Chanel bag just so, preparing their perfect photo moment, and I just want to go over and ask, ‘Who is this for? Who cares that you're having lunch with a bag?' This perpetual documentation of every aspect of life feeds into CCTV and AI and all this kind of stuff, but it is the general nature of our time: everything is documented in an ephemeral way, and no one writes letters any more. I do sometimes think, ‘What are we going to leave as the legacy of our time?'

> **‘When even the Balmain show is smaller and the clothes are relatively quiet, it signals a sea change; a reaction to all the hullabaloo outside the shows.'**

How do you feel as more visible protagonists yourselves now? I have never seen so many pictures of the two of you.

Angelo: [aghast] *Really*?

Alexander: Do you mean incidental photos, in the background?

No, everywhere! The two of you being part of the wider documentation of fashion week, of the industry as a whole.

Alexander: I would love to be more anonymous. I loved wearing a mask during the pandemic, and carried on wearing one for quite a long time afterwards; I still have them.

Angelo: The Americans are still wearing masks at shows.

Alexander: It hinders your reaction, which is great because no one can tell if you're sneering at a look or saying something horrible. I went to someone's child's christening recently, a big thing, and she said there were 2,500 pictures taken at it and that I wasn't in a single one of them, which I was very proud of. I want to be the Margiela of fashion journalism.

Alex mentioned before that fashion now appeals to both a mass audience and hardcore obsessives. Do you think it's easier these days for hardcore fans to access the industry and make a living from fashion?

Angelo: Yes and no. The industry remains a little hard to penetrate, but of course today you have different ways in, like that guy Beka [Gvishiani] from Stylenotcom. I was just reading yesterday what [journalist] Eugene Rabkin had to say about Stylenotcom, which was pretty damning. But Beka has been very intelligent in targeting people at the centre of the industry to write about. He grabbed the spotlight even though he's not a writer – what he ‘writes' is just facts and press-release snippets – but he got a fast-track entryway into the system by taking a different approach.

In that Stylenotcom piece, Eugene Rabkin made the point that designers, whether they like it or not, intrinsically seek the point of view of the critic. They may not appreciate bad criticism, but criticism is fundamental to fostering progress, and if you remove the arena of criticism then you're just left with the kind of benign cheerleading that Stylenotcom has become known for. Of course, brands prefer cheerleading to criticism, but it ultimately hinders fashion's sense of propelling itself forward. I thought it was an interesting point.

Angelo: On one hand you have more of these benign cheerleaders, and on the other hand, I think this past decade has seen an increased resistance to established critics and criticism in general. Like, from a brand's perspective, if it's bad for business, it should be discouraged. Alex, do you increasingly find yourself having to ‘go for a coffee' with a CEO or comms director or designer to discuss something you've written?

Alexander: Yes, and I've had designers phone me. People sometimes take things incredibly personally, which I do understand in some ways. It depends on who it is and what I've written.

Angelo: Yes, it's never supposed to be personal, but sometimes the words come across that way.

Alexander: Or the tone.

Angelo: English is not my first language, so occasionally I'll use the wrong word. I once described Kris Van Assche's approach to fashion as 'cold'; I was referring to it being quite controlled, but that word 'cold' was perceived as a personal criticism, and that season became a nightmare for me.

Do you find yourselves under increasing pressure from your publications to keep on the right side of the advertisers?

Alexander: I've had people [from brands] ask me to attend shows or events that I am not particularly interested in or just don't have time to go to, and they'll put pressure on me by saying, 'But we advertise with the *FT*.' And the *FT* are like, 'We don't care about advertisers; they don't get to say that to you; that is not the way we operate.'

Angelo: PRs tend to apply a lot of pressure, but I am lucky that as long as a photograph of their collection appears alongside my wrap-up article – even if I don't attend that particular show – then it's usually fine. But there have been problems with some designers who consider any form of criticism as a personal takedown.

Alexander: Do you get invited to Dolce & Gabbana shows?

'After the crash in 2008, people demanded a lot more financial transparency, and it became more important to talk about fashion in terms of finance.'

Angelo: I've been readmitted recently for BoF, so I can choose whether to write about them or not; they want me to be there though, which is a nice way of saying, 'OK, we are taking some steps towards re-establishing a rapport, rather than a total ban.'

Alexander: I can understand that in some instances you just don't see eye-to-eye. Like with Hedi Slimane, I wasn't invited to his Saint Laurent shows towards the end, which was disappointing because I loved that last one he did. But then when he went to Celine, they reached out and invited me, which I have a lot of respect for. There is something very big about a designer being able to say, 'I've moved somewhere else; it's a clean slate – let's start again.' Because I do understand people taking it personally. I certainly take it personally if people slag off my writing; it affects me.

Angelo: Absolutely! What keeps the industry going in a way is this need for constant validation. Us as writers, designers as designers, brands as brands – it's a real engine.

Alexander: There is a great Somerset Maugham quote I use: 'People ask you for criticism, but they only want praise.' But I'd add to that – and I think I can say this as we are both fashion critics – that the last ten years has proven the sheer *impotence* of the fashion critic.

Angelo: [laughs] Very true!

Alexander: Hedi's Saint Laurent was a great example of that. Fashion critics initially *loathed* it – it got critically drubbed – and yet it became the best-selling thing in fashion. There used to be a time, which I should say was before my time in the industry, when a bad critique could ruin a collection. If Suzy [Menkes] gave something a bad review, buyers would cancel their orders. That was a very eighties and nineties thing. I occasionally write things for the *Financial Times* that then end up being quoted or reused in its business pages, and that's when the CEO or head of marketing asks to have the coffee, because it's reaching a different audience and can affect the share price. I think the *FT* does have that impact, especially when the point I'm making implies, who is actually going to buy this? I have gone in hard on certain things, such as Frida [Giannini]'s final collection for Gucci. I remember the exact line – it was a very hippie collection, and they were just launching beauty, so I wrote, 'Hippy won't sell lippy.'

Presumably you got the coffee call for that one.

Alexander: I did. But I can understand their annoyance because I commented on the business, and so many people are invested in fashion these days. I know people who work at a hedge fund in the UK who are massive investors in Kering. They have nothing to do with fashion, no knowledge of it whatsoever, but they are interested in industry opinions, they want guidance on whether something is good or bad, if it's going to give them ROI or not.

Let's talk about fashion's CEOs. They've become such visible players this past decade. Thirty years ago, no CEO, besides perhaps Pierre Bergé, had any kind of media profile.

Alexander: Bergé was the first one to have that media presence because Saint Laurent wouldn't talk to anyone. He became the front man, the blustering ball who would talk.

Angelo: In the early 2000s, the more the CEOs brought in big revenues, the more people were paying attention to the numbers, and the more the CEOs came to prominence. Initially, the creative director was the star, with the CEO behind them – like with Tom Ford and Domenico De Sole – but when Marco Bizzarri was appointed CEO of Gucci, he was the one hiring Alessandro Michele and masterminding the huge success, and it made him the rock star of the house. Today, I consider him the CEO who best epitomizes this decade, and I think that's created this whole new dynamic between the CEO and the creative director about who the mastermind is, and who has the star power. The answer is pretty clear when you see Marco Bizzarri photographed at the Gucci show wearing a lime-green velvet suit.

'Jeff Bezos supplies everyday things everyone needs, and Bernard Arnault trades in the unobtainable to the elite. But now the unobtainable is winning.'

Alexander: After the financial crash in 2008, people demanded a lot more transparency financially, and it became more important to talk about fashion in terms of finance, hence the increased presence of CEOs. That does give a different perspective. I don't think it's how things should be judged, but people wanted more of that concrete information, because of the whole subprime mortgage crisis, this idea that finances had been misty and opaque, and people didn't know who actually had money.

And now Bernard Arnault has been declared the wealthiest person on the planet.

Alexander: I was reading that when Tesla's stock dropped – the fact I even know about this stuff when I'm not really interested in it says a lot – and Bernard Arnault became the richest man in the world, there were pieces online, like, 'Who is Bernard Arnault?' It made me think of that Jeanloup Sieff quote that fashion is like 'a storm in a teacup, but when you're in the teacup it is very important'. Of course, most people outside of fashion know nothing about the CEOs or very little about the industry and its history. I remember talking to Raf when he was at Dior, and he said, 'People have no idea who I am; they think Christian Dior is still alive.' I thought he was joking and then I worked with someone who talked about doing an interview with Coco Chanel and I was like, 'She is pretty fucking dead, like 60 years dead.' People think Olivier Rousteing invented Balmain and ask him why he called it Balmain. There is an assumption that people know this massive history that we all know, and they often don't. Even if there are many others who *do* know and *do* care increasingly about this stuff, whether that's via the *FT*'s business pages or the Met Ball and fashion's adjacency to celebrity. It has projected itself larger.

And it's paid off.

Alexander: When it used to be Arnault and Jeff Bezos on the rich list, it was like, Jeff Bezos supplies everyday things everyone needs, and Arnault trades in the unobtainable to the elite. But now elite fashion is winning. Which I think says a lot about fashion, and a lot about the world we live in today. When people still try to say that they don't think fashion is important, I'm like, 'The richest man in the world is that rich because he owns Vuitton and Dior!'

Angelo: But these CEOs only really interest me because I am interested in the theatre of life, the personalities. I think [Francesca] Bellettini at Saint Laurent comes from the same school of thought as Marco Bizzarri. She actually comes from his management team; she was trained by him. They have the same kind of rock'n'roll approach; she could be a singer from a band. People like her and Bizzarri enjoy this kind of exposure, which I think is both a problem and an opportunity for fashion. But what she has done at Saint Laurent is remarkable. She and Anthony Vaccarello have really built something up, even though no one believed in him after the departure of Hedi. We were all super sceptical – and they proved us wrong.

Alexander: I agree. Francesca Bellettini is great, and you can just tell that there is something about her being a woman in this matriarchy that makes a massive difference.

It's interesting that you see fashion as a matriarchy.

Alexander: I mean here we are, three men talking, but fashion is a matriarchy; we are absolutely in the minority. If you look at it in terms of editors and designers, and increasingly the people who work the guts of the fashion industry, it is female. Of course, when you get to the C-suite, it becomes way more cis-white-male dominated, and you can sense it. That's become way more evident in the past ten years.

Angelo: I have a lot of admiration for Elsa Lanzo at Owenscorp. In this particular case, you have Rick Owens, a designer with a super-strong personality, and someone who won't be told how to do things, but they have created an environment in which he can express himself creatively and still do well commercially. She is there to help him, not to smother his creativity.

You make it sound like an anomaly.

Angelo: Yes, and it is evident now that the only cook in the kitchen is the CEO, more than the creative director, because it is the CEO who hires the creative director. It's creating a new and different dynamic from before, when the creative directors were gods, demanding their authorship of everything be acknowledged and publicized.

That dynamic seems focused more on a long-term strategy for the houses themselves, and less on the power of creative directors who, in some cases, seem to be regarded as transient custodians.

Angelo: Completely. For me, the wake-up call on all of this was Alessandro Michele's exit. In the old world, the successful creative director would have been there until he left on his own will. Who would have imagined that someone who did so much for a brand would be let go? We'll probably never know exactly how it went down internally, but what happened demonstrated the CEO's power. Alessandro was not the superstar; he might have looked like it, but he was not bigger than the house itself.

'I was talking with Rick Owens about his company, and he said, 'I own it 100%. If I wanted to, I could burn the whole fucking place down tomorrow.''

Being a designer, stylist, photographer, writer or model remains a *subjective* discipline, which means appraisal of the work will be equally subjective. Whereas the CEO is largely *performative*, and their success is basically indisputable. You can't be a great CEO and not deliver revenue growth. Of course, there are varying levels of performance: Adrian Joffe does a great job for Comme, and then there's Pietro Beccari at Louis Vuitton.

Alexander: But it *does* depend on how you measure the success of a CEO. Is it one who makes a lot of money or one who has the synergy with a designer and allows them to achieve greatness? Pierre Bergé was – and I hope I can say this and that he won't turn in his grave – kind of a crappy CEO; he made some terrible decisions. But did he cement the legacy of the man he loved and believed to be the greatest designer in the world? Yes, absolutely. For me that is the measure of a great CEO. I'd say Mr Bertelli and Mrs Prada are great CEOs, because fuck me, they've positioned Prada at a point where she is an amazing creative and the name is unassailable. There is no way anyone would argue she isn't one of the greatest designers of our time. Adrian Joffe, again, they make money with Comme des Garçons – it's a great business – but he isn't saying to Rei Kawakubo, 'Make sure the models carry a handbag on the catwalk.' Because I've heard instances of CEOs shoving handbags into models' hands as they head out onto the catwalk for a designer's debut show, or overseeing bag campaigns that the designers themselves have never even seen or been a part of. For me, the great CEOs are the ones who truly *care*. Mrs Prada's name is over the door; there is no way she is going to let anyone dick about with Prada or Miu Miu. The same was the case for Pierre Bergé – he had a deeply emotional investment. That's what I think makes a great CEO, even though that might sound like a contradiction given that I write for the *FT*!

Conversely, what *does* interest you about the number and figures, beyond the sheer performative nature of business one-upmanship?

Alexander: The figures make you think about fashion in different ways. Like, you might think a product is great but it's not making money – why? You think something is shit but it's making a fortune – why? I've spoken with Mrs Prada about this and it's something she's equally fascinated by. Like, if I make a black dress and a pink dress, why do we sell ten times more of the black dress? Why if I make a brown coat and a leopard-print coat, how come we sell ten times more of the leopard-print coat? That might be a philosophical consideration, but a lot of the financial CEO stuff actually slots into the basic premise of, why do people desire certain things?

If you looked at the three big Parisian fashion houses 20 years ago, you had Galliano at Dior, total maverick; Karl at Chanel, in his own way a maverick persona; and at Yves Saint Laurent, you had Tom Ford, who had reinvented the role of the designer as a kind of entrepreneurial-creative-director-sex-symbol. If you look at those same houses now, you have Maria Grazia Chiuri at Dior, Virginie Viard at Chanel, and Anthony Vaccarello at Saint Laurent, all of whom are very successfully serving their respective houses. But could you envisage a true maverick at the helm of one of those big Parisian houses today?

Alexander: I don't know if those types of designers would even want to do that now. I feel like maybe designers have been offered these big gigs and don't actually want them. My favourite thing that Rick Owens ever said to me was, we were talking about ownership of his company, and he was like, 'I own it 100%, and if I wanted to, tomorrow I could burn the whole fucking place down.' Having that freedom not to have to be answerable to anybody or anything is really amazing. Azzedine was the modern blueprint. Before he passed away, he was doing an exhibition at the Design Museum in London, so he decided he wasn't going to make a collection at all – he just said, 'We're not selling this season' – because he wanted to focus on the exhibition instead. Besides Rick, no one can really do that. Maybe a bit with Mrs Prada; I think sometimes she wants to make money, but I don't think it is what drives her. Who else has that degree of freedom and with that mindset as well? People who aren't answerable to anybody else.

'I've heard instances of CEOs shoving handbags into models' hands as they head out onto the catwalk for a designer's debut show.'

Angelo: Maybe the definition of maverick has changed, too. Today, it's probably someone who can shift the codes while serving the house in the best possible way. I really appreciate what Anthony Vaccarello is doing at Saint Laurent; he is not a maverick per se, but he is the closest thing to a maverick that we can have today in a big house. Someone who tackles the codes, plays with them, and moves them forward.

Alexander: I have drunk the Kool-Aid with Vaccarello. He has serviced the house and built it up, but in terms of what he puts out as a show, I think it's extraordinary. As messaging and as clothing, I think something shifted and it is not just product, it is *fashion*. It is really difficult fashion sometimes, which is great. I loved that show in September [Spring/Summer 2023] that some people hated. I mean, when do you come out of a show and people either love or hate it? I was completely hysterical about this recent one [in March]. He is of my generation and there is an understanding of the power of nostalgia. So you walk in and you see this amazing super-sized restaging of the Hotel InterContinental ballroom [the original Yves Saint Laurent haute-couture show venue].[6] That exaggeration alone is very modern; you know, it's the size of a football field, the shoulders are a metre apart, even the shoe buckles are pulled out and exaggerated. But alongside that, there is an understanding of craft and of bodies and of fabric. I think some people see Vaccarello as just styling and image-making rather than incredible clothes, which is fine, but I think it's extraordinary and I love the focus the brand puts on the actual garments. I think there was only one handbag in this recent show and in the one before there were none at all. Today, that is such a bold proposition from a house that makes so much money from leather goods, to really throw itself behind Vaccarello's clothes.

Angelo: I agree. He's stepped in, taken the codes, played with them with taste and intelligence, but not reinvented the house completely. In the same way, Maria Grazia is playing with the Dior codes – a bit like Karl did at Chanel – but there's always a Bar jacket, a white shirt, and a big skirt. The changes are slight from one collection to another, but she is serving the purpose of the house really well.

Alexander: Yes, what she creates is a great luxury product. But I kind of think that is different to being a fashion designer, different to being someone who is going to shift the way we dress.

That feels like such a rare commodity these days.

Alexander: I mean, Karl desperately wanted to be that, but he wasn't. You look at those Chanel collections and there is – this is really horrible, but I'm going to say it anyway – a desperation to some of Karl's collections to do something different. I think possibly because of the competition he had with Yves Saint Laurent or with Azzedine, those people who really *did* change the way that people dress. Karl wanted to do that; he wanted to invent something. The way he worked with Chanel really changed the way designers go into houses and look at their heritage and how they can reactivate that. I am interested to see what the Met do [with the Karl Lagerfeld exhibition],[7] because you can't be like, 'This is his; this belongs to Karl.' It doesn't, he was a magpie and borrowed from lots of people, which was his strength.

The thing that belonged to Karl, was Karl, really. The Karlness of it all.

Alexander: I think he even called

himself a vampire; this idea of sucking the life out of a moment and encapsulating it in something, and the fact that his Chanel was always Chanel but never the same. Chanel was great; it was like, here's a bunch of codes and they are so abstract we can work with them in all these different ways, and it encapsulates every fashion moment, but it is not *creating* that moment. At the end of the nineties it looks like Galliano because Galliano was creating that moment. There are periods in the eighties when it looks like Lacroix because Lacroix created that moment. I know I'm referencing the people I love, but anyway.

You could argue that in the early 2000s those Chanel couture shows had touches of Hedi Slimane's Dior Homme.

Alexander: Yes. To go back to your original point about maverick designers, it's worth adding that what Virginie Viard at Chanel or Maria Grazia at Dior does is different again to what Karl was doing at Chanel. They are capturing what is going on, servicing the house, and producing incredibly successful collections in terms of selling, but they are not changing the way we look at ourselves and our bodies. But, you know, the purpose of a house like Dior has fundamentally changed. It's become a different type of business now.

> ‘If it has a logo on it or a designer name attached to it, it will probably sell. It's desirable in that sense, but is it really bringing something to the world?’

Compared to when?

Alexander: Back when John was at Dior – yes, I'm enthusing about him again – it was like, ‘We don't care if the collection sells; we want publicity!’ It is really interesting when you look at that first John ready-to-wear show because he just obliterated the Dior client base. There's all these women sitting there neatly in their little tweed suits, and Eva Herzigová comes out in a skirt so short you can basically see her crotch. Looking at that now, it's absolutely deranged. It was an amazing moment in fashion because there was this build-up to the millennium and we all thought the world was going to end, so there was this dancing-on-the-lip-of-the-volcano thing happening. There was a real frenzy to Galliano's shows, to McQueen's, to lots of the stuff going on at that particular moment.

Is that frenzied revolution happening anywhere today?

Alexander: You do see it in some places, but not at the scale of Dior. It's often pretty wayward, too. Like, I feel at Nina Ricci, they've just torched the house. That show was horrendous. It's one of those examples of things that can happen in fashion where the hype just *obliterates* everything, with no one bothering to think if this has any design context or desirability.

Are design and desirability not the cornerstones of any fashion endeavour?

Alexander: Designers just need to stop and look at what they're doing. If it has a logo on it or a designer name attached, it will probably sell. It's desirable in that sense, but is it bringing something to the world? What is the point of it? I actually think people should ask themselves the question, ‘Is this attractive?’ more often. I don't mean like some prissy 1950s prom dress, but rather, ‘Is there a beauty to it?’ Rick Owens clearly asks himself that question, and his response is, ‘Yeah, this is *my* fucking idea of beauty!’ and that's the great thing he is pumping out into the world. I remember him saying to me once, ‘It's an antidote to airport fashion.’

This all begs the question, who or what constitutes a great designer today? Or rather, who are the designers that are really expressing or defining the moment we're currently living in? Who is the Galliano, the McQueen, the Rei Kawakubo or the Helmut Lang of this generation?

Angelo: It's very difficult for someone to express the moment now because the moment is way more fragmented than ever before. So you cannot have just one shift. There are so many different things. I would say that in a certain way Jonathan Anderson speaks about the moment, also Rick Owens. Who else? [Pauses] Pierpaolo is a great designer. He is not in his best moment right now, but in haute couture he has made some things that are so beautiful he can only be a great designer.

Alexander: This is something I am perpetually asking myself, like, who is in the top 20? Who's in the pantheon of the greats? And then they keep dying. It's really sad.

That's true. Over the past decade we've lost Azzedine Alaïa, Karl Lagerfeld, Vivienne Westwood, Thierry Mugler, Paco Rabanne, Virgil Abloh, Alber Elbaz, and Issey Miyake among others.

Alexander: And more are going to come.

You mentioned Karl Lagerfeld before, and this distinction between a designer and a creative director serving a house. Do you think the current creative director role is here to stay or will it evolve into something else again?

Angelo: There are designers, like the Japanese or Dries, who design stuff and there are designers – creative directors – who coordinate design with great ideas. The past 20 years has been peak time for the creative director, someone who can turn around a whole house with their vision, and who can apply this vision to clothes, campaigns, stores and everything else required of them. Alessandro [Michele] has been a wonderful creative director and stylist, assembling things, but the design element has been relatively limited. I think there is a new character coming up who is the chief marketing officer, who sometimes overlaps with the communications director, which is very interesting because they liken marketing to communications, of course. But the overlap of narrative, marketing and product can have lethal effects on collections – they can lose sight of the clothes they're making. A case in point is Valentino: all this storytelling about inclusivity is pillaged from Gucci and doesn't make sense within that particular house. It doesn't matter how significant Valentino's stylistic turnaround has been – from the era of Mr Valentino to now – as far as I'm concerned, the house will always be linked to this world of Latin-American socialites with big villas.

> ‘I remember talking to Raf Simons when he was at Dior, and he said, ‘People have no idea who I am; they think Christian Dior is still alive.’’

Alexander: I'm sometimes surprised by who we consider to be designers, stylists or creative directors. It's not always as clean cut as that. The first time I interviewed Mrs Prada I assumed we were going to have this really highbrow conceptual conversation, not at all about clothes. It was in 2015, around the time of the Prada collection that was duchess satin; everything was pink, and it was very, very sweet, like *too* sweet. As soon as we sat down, she was like, ‘We found this fabric and it was a complete nightmare to work with. We had to work on how to stitch it; you see, this is how we sewed it.’ So it goes back to design, back to the craft, even for Mrs Prada, who is perceived as being totally disconnected from clothes. She used to reject the idea of fashion and now she embraces the power of being a designer and what she can do with the reality of her collections. Ultimately, I've found that when people drill down it becomes about the craft. So, it's Rick, it's Mrs Prada, it's John Galliano, it's Marc Jacobs, who people might perceive as lots of styling, but Marc is there on the floor cutting things out.

What about Jonathan Anderson in all this? Angelo just said he speaks of the moment.

Angelo: He is the epitome of the great creative director of our times, the one who will be studied in books in 40 years' time. You can see his vision through everything.

Alexander: Jonathan is definitely someone who is very in tune with how people consume, and is engineered for now, but he is actually different. He is not a stylist; he is a curator – it is about assembling in a different way. I'd still say he is up there with the greats though because the way he looks at fashion is extraordinary, and so many people copy it.

Angelo: It was interesting what Alex was just saying about designers like Miuccia Prada ultimately being about craft. Because for me, as an Italian, I'm particularly impressed by the way Jonathan Anderson has managed to transform craft, which is historically very Italian, into something entirely modern. When most brands talk about craft, you immediately think about the past, but with Loewe, Jonathan has made it modern and inventive and really special. So, yes, his work is like that of a curator – of ideas, of culture, of craft – but with such an exacting vision that he achieves what he wants… even though I suspect he doesn't design a single piece himself!

On the topic of craft and design, the invitation to the Balenciaga show was a mock-up of a tailor's pattern, as if to say tailoring is the most noble pursuit, the essence of fashion, and the antidote to the negative noise surrounding the brand. It made sense. But it struck me that the term *tailoring* might be going the same way as *luxury*, a word that's associated with some form of inherent value that has been so misused and debased that it no longer holds any value. On one hand, it feels like tailoring is now used as an antidote to logo-heavy sportswear, and on the other we are seeing, in Saint Laurent, Dior Homme, and of course, Balenciaga among others, glimpses of genuinely new and exciting forms of tailoring.

Angelo: Do you remember, Jonathan, we were planning a story for *System* in early 2020 about tailoring; I was supposed to interview people like Alessandro Michele and Peter Do because we saw something new emerging. While the pandemic killed everything, the movement towards tailoring had started earlier.

Alexander: It's a bit like the war: you see traces of Dior in 1939, and then they get picked back up after the war. The same way the pandemic essentially stopped everything. The war stopped everything, it just presses pause, and then you slightly exaggerate things around you, but there is no significant movement during that time.

Angelo: The craze for sweatshirts and streetwear peaked before the pandemic and then the pandemic made easy dressing the only solution, where designers were all about loungewear and staying cosy. So now that we are out again with a bang, you want to be suited and booted and looking properly dressed, but I find it sometimes so conservative that it looks like a restoration of sorts.

Alexander: There are so many things you could read into that. In a period of hardship, people tend to become more conservative, it happened after 9/11, that was when you had Olivier Theyskens at Rochas, Lanvin, and this return to lady dressing. With a very cynical eye, you could just say it's easier to charge more for a tailored suit than for a hoodie.

Angelo: Yes, the mark-up is really high.

Alexander: People are willing to pay more because there is more work and time. 'Time is the ultimate luxury' and all that bullshit. There is another thing: one of my favourite quotes about fashion is about it only being new in contrast to that which has just ceased to be fashionable. Hemlines went up, so of course they've now dropped; we all wore sweatpants, of course we are going to want to be tailored now. I was talking with Pierpaolo the other day about the show he did with shirts and ties [Autumn/Winter 2023-2024], he said, 'Kids want to wear it; there is a sense that younger people have never had to wear a suit and shirt and tie, so they don't have the restrictions that older generations do.' It's the idea that people now wear sweatpants and sweatshirts to work in, and then when they go out at night, they wear a suit. It is the opposite of how people used to dress. So as a novelty item, there is this sense of being able to button yourself into a really well-made suit and feel that you look great. It's what Vivienne Westwood used to say about comfort being a mental thing.

Angelo: Just to go back to the Balenciaga show the other day… as much as I liked it because it felt like a clearance of a few things, I was also hoping that it would take a new direction, a new leap in terms of silhouette. But it felt like an act of repentance, which made me a bit sad, because it looked like he was saying, 'I'm sorry; I am just a humble tailor.' I was talking with a friend as we were coming out of a particularly shitty show this season, and I told her, 'Look, even *they've* put an oversize black jacket on the catwalk, so surely it means the trend is now officially over', but then seeing *another* oversize tailored jacket at Balenciaga, albeit a little bit different, made me crave for something radically new from Demna.

Alexander: Talking to him about that show, it felt like he was moving away from being a creative director and going back to being a designer. It's what we were saying just before – as a creative director, design is part of what you do, but it is not the focus, and because of the pressures of everything else, it actually becomes a small part of what you do. Whereas being a designer has the implication that *that* is what you are doing. You are making clothes – that is your focus. Even if you have tertiary things.

It is not about designing the stores; it is about designing clothes.

Alexander: Well, it is way more than just designing clothes today, for sure. But when just designing clothes becomes the least of your worries, that is when it becomes a problem. But I think the role of 'creative director' does imply that you can go in and oversee stuff, have a direction, and if you can lead people effectively, then there is no reason why you can't come to that from a field outside of fashion. There are lots of people who are fashion designers who don't have a fashion-design background. I think it depends on your passion and your curiosity, your commitment.

Which brings us nicely to Pharrell. His appointment at Vuitton has been met with mixed reviews, even though he's yet to have presented anything.

Alexander: I'd heard he was going to commit 30% of his time to Louis Vuitton, and to me that sounds entirely reasonable. I did some maths and if you are talking about Vuitton now being a €20 billion business, if the menswear business is €500 million – which is bigger than Rick Owens, bigger than a lot of other people – that is like 2.5% of the turnover. So, in a way it doesn't really matter – it can just be window dressing.

'Being a creative director is way more than just designing clothes. But when the clothes become the least of your worries, that's when it's a problem.'

It all comes back to Bernard Arnault's original vision for using fashion to market the kind of luxury bags that have incredible mark-up potential…

Alexander: He is what everything is based on. At that *1997* exhibition, they're basically saying that it all starts in October 1996, so it's John into Dior, McQueen into Givenchy, Narciso into Loewe, Marc at Vuitton, Michael Kors at Céline, Margiela at Hermès, Alber into Guy Laroche, Hedi into Saint Laurent first time around, Stella going into Chloé. It all happened at that point, and it was all people mimicking what Arnault had done. He shook the dice and then everyone else was replicating it. So, it is very interesting that there was this massive influence of how he was reconstituting these houses.

And back to Pharrell. How do you view that appointment, in the lineage of what you've just described?

Alexander: Some people have been a little off about Pharrell going to Vuitton, but is it that different from Stella McCartney going to Chloé? There's that quote from Karl, something like, 'I think they should have taken a big name. They did – but in music, not fashion. Let's hope she's as gifted as her father.' Some kind of bitchy Karlism. But you know, *is* it that different from someone with relatively little training and just a famous name? As with all these things, I want to be perpetually surprised. That's what's great about fashion – you're always hoping to be surprised.

Angelo: I'm the same. I am still excited about fashion because there will always be change, new designers, and new houses leading. No one expected Alessandro to turn Gucci around the way he did, and I remember when Demna was appointed at Balenciaga, a friend of mine literally laughed out loud.

Alexander: People have said to me, 'Oh you must hate the idea of Pharrell at Vuitton', but I don't hate it at all. Ideologically, I think people see Angelo and me as purists, but I'm interested to see what happens. I don't think we should write anything off.

How would you feel about, say, the next Louis Vuitton menswear show being presented in the wider context of a Pharrell concert performance for 60,000 people at the Stade de France?

Angelo: The scale of a big event, like the Balmain Festival,[8] with thousands of people is so different to a fashion show. A fashion show is an event within a calendar, within a day. A big event demands so much of your energy to be there. For me, entertainment is the way it is perceived and broadcast outside because it makes good online content. But fashion still needs to have an element of elitism in whatever form, so having an audience that is the happy few, and then everyone can tap into it, but not physically.

Alexander: When you do a show on that scale, like the Balmain Festival, it's a show with musical performances tagged on; it's like the fashion show isn't enough because it only lasts ten minutes. The idea of getting thousands of people to go to some far-flung destination and then to have them wait for 45 minutes, only to watch something that lasts 10 minutes, and then all go home, would never work. Which is why they tag all these other things on, so it becomes a two-hour event. I mean I get it, if I was going to a Madonna concert, I would expect it to be two hours and not ten minutes. But for anyone in fashion, it couldn't possibly be two hours long – we don't have the attention span for that!

Angelo: I just want to see the Pharrell at Vuitton project develop in a way that is plausible.

Did you consider the Virgil Abloh project, Pharrell's predecessor at Vuitton menswear, as something plausible?

Angelo: In a way, yes. But the project feels incomplete because he died, leaving such a sense of unfinished business. On one hand, the group they've created in Italy – New Guards Group, which was formed largely around Virgil's success with Off-White – is one of today's new movers and shakers in Milan, and on the other, Virgil represented an interesting shift, being less a trained designer and more a cultural catalyst…

Alexander: Like a DJ of clothes.

Angelo: Exactly. He applied music mentalities to fashion, which wasn't necessarily new, but in the way a stylist has an eye for visual things, Virgil was using soundbites, communities, and cultural references to express himself.

There is that Tommy Ton photo from 2009 of Virgil, Kanye West and their friends looking like outsiders in front of a Comme show in Paris; fast-forward to 2021 and the shocking news that Virgil had died, far too young. In that interim decade you cannot underestimate his rise to prominence, his presence in fashion, and ultimately, his legacy.

Angelo: Virgil's legacy will be

'People have said to me, 'Oh you must hate the idea of Pharrell at Vuitton', but I don't hate it at all. I don't think we should write anything off.'

long-lasting. He opened doors and I think he'll always be remembered for that. He made it possible for a whole wave of Black creativity, for people to access certain areas and express themselves. It's no secret how critical I was of some of his output but looking at that work now, compared to all those who came after and what they have done, I'd say he was a very instinctive creative. His period of output was short, sadly for him, but he had something to say. If he was alive today, he'd still be relevant.

Do you sense Vuitton men's will forever be defined by his time there?

Angelo: It's too early to tell, but for me what is interesting right now is how Louis Vuitton has dealt with the loss of Virgil in the collections that came since his death. This last one [in January 2023] was a total shipwreck. You had a movie director, a live performer, and a crazy stage set all vying for attention.[9]

'At that Chanel supermarket show, everyone went crazy, ripping the place apart, grabbing the branded supermarket products. It was like day of the locust.'

Alexander: I read a comment on Instagram about that show that simply said, 'Why would you create so many distractions from your clothes?' That is exactly what I felt at the show. I was like, where am I supposed to be looking?

Angelo: It sums up how huge the Vuitton machine has become.

Alexander: I think there was a sense in that show, which you get in a few shows, but particularly in that one because it was so unanchored, of it being a design team; that there were 40 people producing 40 different single outfits, and how do you make that hang together as a collection.

You mean it proves you can't design by committee?

Alexander: Exactly. It proved that if you don't have something or someone to pull it all together, people just go in all different directions, each one trying to be the star, whether that's the clothes, the live performance, or the set design. It comes back once again to what Demna had written: the sets and the noise and the performance and the entertainment overshadowed the clothes.

Angelo mentioned the huge scale of the Vuitton 'machine'. Do you think the big brands are now too big to fail?

Alexander: Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Hermès – possibly Dior but I'm not sure – they *are* too big to fail. Their names mean so much outside of fashion, they are just going to keep growing and growing because that is the momentum they have. I don't know if anything could stop them. It makes me think of that Chanel supermarket show [Autumn/Winter 2014]; no one really wrote about this, but everyone literally went crazy and ripped the place apart at the end, grabbing the Chanel-branded supermarket products. It was like day of the fucking locust at that show. It was amazing.

Surely Karl had that exact scenario in mind.

Alexander: Absolutely! I was thinking, what other brand could elicit that hysterical reaction over it branding? If Hermès did a supermarket it would happen, if Louis Vuitton did, it would happen, and it happened with Chanel – but I don't think it would happen with any other house. There's just this irrational desire for those names, through their products, branding and identity. It really doesn't matter what they make, as long as you put the name on it, it's going to work.

Angelo: It's this idea of branding things in a very simplistic way so it feels instinctive to people.

Alexander: I've talked to people outside of fashion – I do have *some* friends outside fashion – and they've been like, 'Oh, so that's Valentino', and I'm like, 'How do you know?' and they said, 'Well, it's pink.' Without being aware of any of its heritage, or its use of red. These days, it's all about Bottega green or now this new Burberry blue. It's like the London Underground map; the original colour scheme was designed for people who couldn't read.[10] They knew that they just had to follow the red line and that would get them home. Looking at this in the context of recent fashion history is interesting because it's such a precise distillation of the past ten years.

Going back to your original point about Chanel, Vuitton and Hermès being the only brands able to elicit supermarket hysteria, it's interesting that all three of them are French.

Alexander: It is actually that root in French early-20th-century luxury. In a way, they come from very specialized points. Chanel is perfume; Hermès is handbags; Vuitton is trunks. You can boil them down to one thing for each name.

And Dior was fashion?

Alexander: Dior is more nebulous because it is not so easily boiled down. It is getting bigger, and it will continue, but it is less unassailable than the other three. I find that really fascinating. It's like, are they going to be here in a hundred years? Yes, absolutely.

Angelo: The system in Paris is unbeatable, and the way the French have managed to create a culture around fashion. One of the problems for me with Italy is that as much as fashion is part of its culture, it has always been an industry there. There is not even an institutional museum devoted to fashion in the entire country, whereas you have several just in Paris. So this goes deep into the culture of a country, and that affects the whole thing. If you want to graduate into the major league, you have to go to Paris. If you are in London, you are just a renegade with vision but not much structure. New York for me has always just been Anna Wintour trying to impose her power to make fashion week there relevant.

Alexander: Realistically the thing with Paris and fashion is that it has this history going back to Louis XIV that's unassailable. That's where it all starts. It's just way more part of the culture, and considered very different to all these other places. It has the crafts, it has the infrastructure, and this nucleus. There are people who do craft things in Paris who can't do that anywhere else. So I think Paris is seen as this real hub of expertise. When you then tag on those houses that have these lineages stretching back hundreds of years it is something else entirely.

'Are Vuitton, Hermès and Chanel going to be here in a hundred years? Yes, absolutely. I don't know if anything could stop them. They are too big to fail.'

Angelo: Of course, it is the world's number-one tourist capital, too. The scale and grandeur of the city is a beautiful frame to all the fashion we see, so that fashion has spread all over the city.

Alexander: Paris has literally been 'fashioned', and so, with haute couture in Paris, there is an artisanal culture dating back to the 17th century that hangs over these big houses, implying their handbags are made by hand, when of course they're actually made by machines. Whereas in Italy, it is actually a celebration of this same industrialization.

We can't talk about Paris without talking a bit more about Hermès. You can't help but admire how this Parisian institution so stubbornly sticks to its 'art of discretion', in spite of the wider industry shift towards attention-grabbing fashion. Yet it continues to have the highest brand equity of any luxury house. Why?

Angelo: As much as The Row can be seen as an interesting fashion interpretation of the Hermès world, there is an element of 'wrongness' about Hermès which sets it apart from the rest. I don't know how to put it into words, but they always present themselves as being a little outside of fashion, or perhaps *above* it. Although the menswear sometimes gets closer to fashion; it plays with certain trends.

Alexander: It might be a weird comparison to make, but Hermès feels a bit like Margaret Howell.[11] She is always doing her own thing, sometimes there is an intersection with fashion, but she does what she feels like doing. It is the same with Hermès, just on a far grander scale. The other thing that Hermès has, of course, are these status-symbol bags that are like logos without being logos. There is the whole scarcity about it, the inability to buy it obviously makes you want to buy it; it's the oldest trick in the book – you can't have it, so it's the only thing you want. Hermès refused to confirm this to me officially, but I got told by Kyle Richards, the Real Housewife of Beverly Hills,[12] that regardless of how much you spend there, you can only buy two of certain Hermès bags a year, like the Kellys or the Birkins. So, it is this extreme supply and demand.

How significant is it that Hermès remains an independent family business?

Alexander: Hugely significant. Because the family are still involved, it's not just about making a ton of money; it is a legacy. With Hermès, you get the feeling that they could make far more money if they lowered the quality of everything by making it somewhere else. Or if they made a million Birkins a year they would sell every one of them, but they don't want to do that.

Angelo: They are not into hype; they're anti-hype.

Alexander: Hermès have made themselves so valuable by valuing themselves.

We have lived through the opposite end of that with 'hypebeast culture' and…

Alexander: …the Supreme brick![13]

Different product, different audience, same desirability.

Alexander: It's actual value versus perceived value. Hermès are not trying to sell you a shitty pair of underpants with their name on it.

Angelo: Also, Hermès is one of the last houses that places importance on value for money. You get the feeling the investment is real, whereas in fashion over the last few years, the value you pay is for the hype the brand generates. You are almost aware you're buying shitty stuff; you want it because of the hype, but once the hype bubble bursts, you're left with nothing.

Lastly, what do you think is the ambition of someone who wants to start a house or be a designer today? Are they still looking to those megabrands and luxury groups as the gold standard of what to strive for? Or do you think a shift in people's values – regarding sustainability, responsible practice, and ultimately capitalism – might alter the metrics of success?

Angelo: The big groups cannot be imitated in any way – they are so big and so overgrown – but this leaves an interesting space of movement to any young designer who wants to emerge. If they keep their scale more reasonable, as they grow maybe the groups will turn their attention towards them. I don't want to say that big money wins, but of course the big groups have all the means at their disposal, in terms of shows and distribution and attention grabbing, but there is still room to manoeuvre.

Alexander: If you were to ask this question to the designers themselves, I'm not sure they'd say they want to be like Dior, Vuitton or Chanel. I think they'd say they want to be more like Rick Owens or Azzedine or Comme des Garçons, because they all have healthy businesses and can support themselves, but they're creatively free. These are the people who other designers respect, even envy. It will be interesting to see what happens with Phoebe Philo because she might reset the very thing you're addressing – how people gauge success. We've just talked about the scarcity of Hermès, and the idea of wanting something of real value but not being able to buy it because it's been produced in limited numbers. This may become a wider metric of success. Houses that really believe in what they're putting out, as opposed to trying to satisfy a market need.

Angelo: But that is not the mentality in these big luxury houses. The mentality is that everything has to be bigger, because the bigger you get and the more profit you make, will only ever be considered a good thing.

Alexander: My big problem is when people say, our profits are up 50%, and I'm like, so are you making things out of poorer quality materials in cheaper production facilities? Because that is how profits go up! You can't just be like, 'Oh, crocodile is so much cheaper these days than it used to be!' You are cutting corners, which begs the question, how much can you hack away at luxury before it isn't luxurious anymore? I think that is a really big question. And possibly will be answered in the next ten years.

1. The exhibition *Forever Valentino*, co-curated by Fury and Massimiliano Gioni, was an exploration of the Roman house timed to coincide with its founder's 90th birthday. Featuring over 200 Valentino haute-couture pieces and ready-to-wear outfits in an 'immersive scenography', it ran from November 2022 to April 2023 at M7, a design hub in downtown Doha, Qatar.

2. The final part of Matthieu Blazy's 'Italian Trilogy' of shows for Bottega Veneta, the Autumn/Winter 2023-2024 collection featured 81 looks. Blazy told *Vogue* that, 'From day one, we decided not to edit the collection. We kept on adding and adding characters.' This multiplicity of looks, styles, and personalities was, Blazy noted, a reflection of the Italian street and its lack of hierarchy, and was widely seen as an implicit criticism of Italy's anti-immigrant, far-right prime minister Giorgia Meloni.

3. The exhibition *Back Side, dos à la mode*, curated by Alexandre Samson, used 100 pieces from the Palais Galliera's collection to explore how the back has been revealed and showcased by designers including Martin Margiela, Azzedine Alaïa and Yohji Yamamoto. It was held at Musée Bourdelle from July to November 2019 as Palais Galliera was being renovated.

4. In 2008, Susannah Frankel was fashion critic for UK newspaper the *Independent*, a position she held from 1999 to 2012; today she is editor in chief of *Another*. Penny Martin was then editor in chief of ShowStudio; since September 2009 she has held the same post for biannual magazine *The Gentlewoman*.

5. The exhibition *1997 Fashion Big Bang* at Palais Galliera, Paris, explored what curator Alexandre Samson calls the 'paradigm shift' that 'opened the 21st century in fashion', which he believes took place 25 years ago and was embodied in 'spectacular haute couture, a new canon of masculine aesthetics, the first-ever It bag, the inauguration of the first Parisian concept store'.

6. In 1976, Yves Saint Laurent decided to move his haute-couture shows from his headquarters at 5 Avenue Marceau to the Salon Impérial of the Hôtel InterContinental on Rue de Castiglione. The first collection presented was the Autumn/Winter 1976, *Opéras – Ballets russes*, and was his first haute-couture show with music. In 1992, Saint Laurent chose the collection as the most beautiful memory of his career, telling *Elle* that: 'Perhaps it wasn't the most successful one, but it was wonderfully received at a time when the world condemned opulence – and it was opulent.'

7. The spring 2023 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, *Karl Lagerfeld: A Line of Beauty* was a look back at the German designer's 65-year career. Featuring 180 pieces from his 54 years at Fendi, 26 at Chanel, 25 at Chloé, and 35 at his own brand, the show was only the tenth at the Costume Institute dedicated to a single designer since 1973. While praising it as 'tightly edited, highly enjoyable, ultimately convincing', Vanessa Friedman in the *New York Times* wrote that it 'also fails entirely, and deliberately, to address the complications of the man'.

8. Held since 2019, the Balmain Festival is 'an annual celebration mixing the best in food, music, and fashion', with proceeds going to charity. The most recent event was held in September 2022 for 7,000 spectators at the Stade Jean Bouin in Paris. The central event was the runway show, which lasted over 30 minutes and featured more than 100 looks. It culminated with 76-year-old pop icon Cher, dressed in skin-tight latex, singing her hit 'Strong Enough'.

9. In a tent in the Louvre's Cour Carrée, the Louis Vuitton Spring/Summer 2023 menswear show featured a set and film by Michel and Olivier Gondry designed to look like a teenager's bedroom, a musical performance from Rosalía standing on a yellow New York cab, clothing design by the Louis Vuitton team and Brooklyn designer Colm Dillane (aka, KidSuper), styling by Ib Kamara, and 70 different looks. Despite this line-up, the vast majority of comments left on the show's official Twitter feed were about one subject: when K-pop legend J-Hope of BTS was going to turn up.

10. The diagrammatic London Tube map was first designed in 1933 by Harry Beck, an electrical draughtsman working for London Underground. Innovatively ignoring geographical reality, he stripped the map back to its essentials – like an electrical circuit – using neat, coloured lines that ran only horizontal, vertical or at an angle of 45° for maximum legibility. The design was originally rejected by the rail company, but a test printing proved popular. The map's design, which is still the basis for the London Underground map, earned Beck 10 guineas or about £700 in 2023 money.

11. 'I design clothes for an active lifestyle,' Margaret Howell told *Vogue* in 2021. 'A relaxed feeling, something comfortable and casual looking.' She established her label in 1970 with the help of designer Joseph Ettedgui, who told her, 'Once you design a full wardrobe for men, I'll open a shop for you.' Which he did. In 1978, Howell was contacted by the production team working on Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of *The Shining*, which needed 13 corduroy jackets for Jack Nicholson's character, Jack Torrance. Howell was pleased to supply the jacket, but less enamoured with the film, telling *GQ*: 'I found it irritating.'

12. Kyle Richards – 'mom, wife, actor, author, producer, animal lover' in her Instagram bio – has appeared in all 12 seasons of reality show *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. In 2019, she founded Kyle + Shahida, her own label of 'luxury resort and loungewear' made, according to its website, with 'one-of-a-kind matchless, high-tech natural materials with unique and precious touch and feel'.

13. Part of what Highsnobiety described as 'Supreme's sadomasochistic relationship with its fans', the Supreme brick was a branded red brick sold in a white cardboard box. Released in 2016 and priced at $30, commentators at the time seemed unsure whether the brick was simply a brick or a Situationist critique of neo-liberal endtimes. Either way, it sold out within minutes.

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93

Paris Fashion Week
28 February – 7 March 2023

Portfolio by Juergen Teller

Creative Partner Dovile Drizyte

Additional photography by David Häuser,
Dovile Drizyte, Emma Williams, and Julien Grignon.

Paris Fashion
du Mardi au Samed
11h-19h
Vintage clothin
Dépôt-vente
Dior
Chanel
Yves St Lauren
Hermès...
CHANEL
Cartier
GUATEMALA

SAI
NT

YSL

System
YSL

TRY
FREE
dott
GRATUIT
ESSAI
me
dott
dott

DIOR
XIN LIU
Dior Ambassador in China
Dior

G

PLEASE
NO SOCIAL MEDIA
NO PICTURES
THANK YOU

PARIS FASHION WEEK
PARIS FASHION WEEK
100% ÉLECTRIQUE
L'ORÉAL
EX-900-PY
93

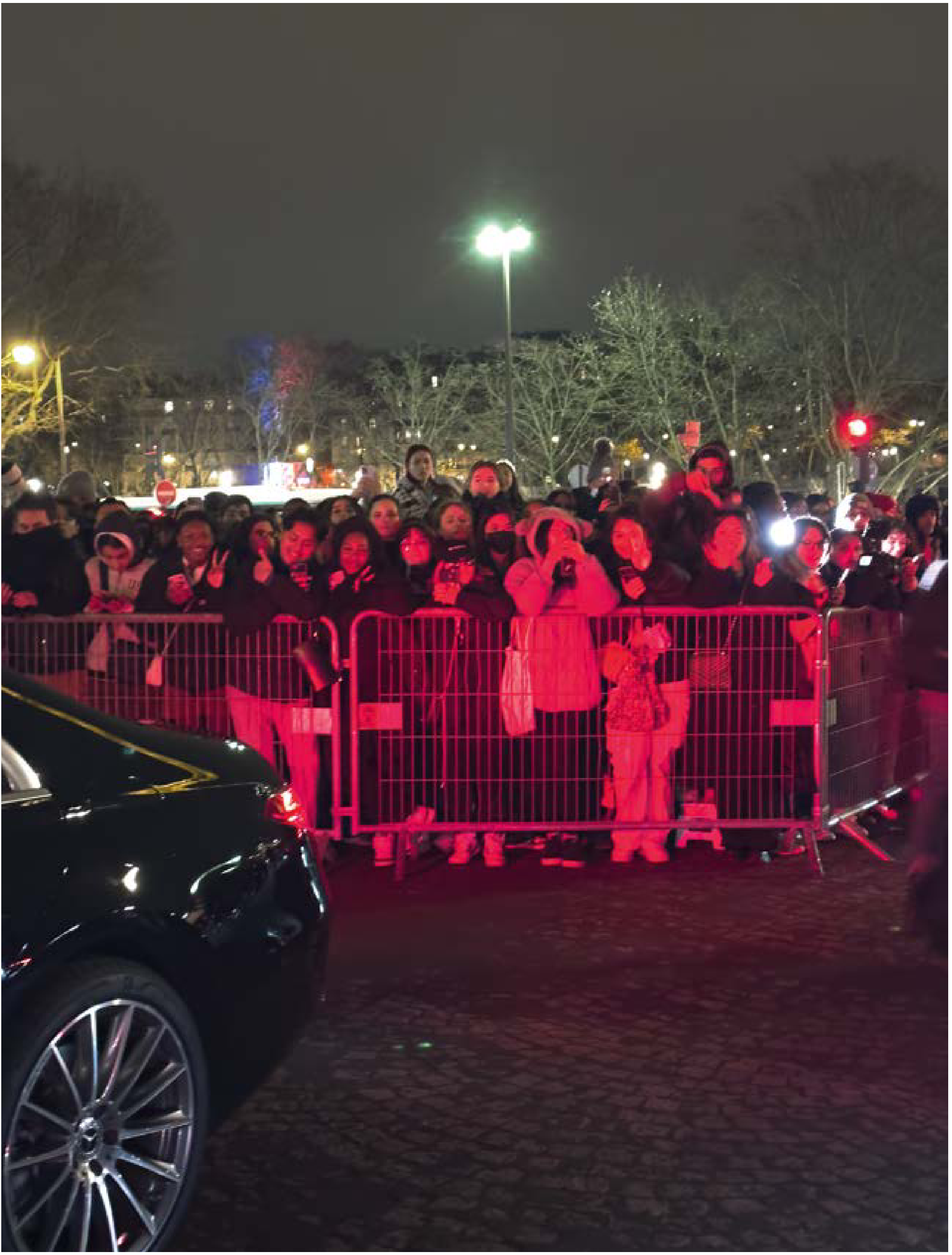
SHOW SPACE
Maille 1/2

Forbes
Forbes

Deux Musées
es Deux Musées

DIG&VOLTA

↓ Sortie



HENRIOT

ÉDITIONS DU LOUVRE
UN LIEU D'ÉTUDE ET DE RECHERCHE
A PLACE FOR STUDY AND RESEARCH
MANTEGNA

UMD 4

FASHION IN 2022
STYLE.COM

10
PARIS
PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN
MESSI
30
MBAPPE
7

Bayern München
Champions League
2020

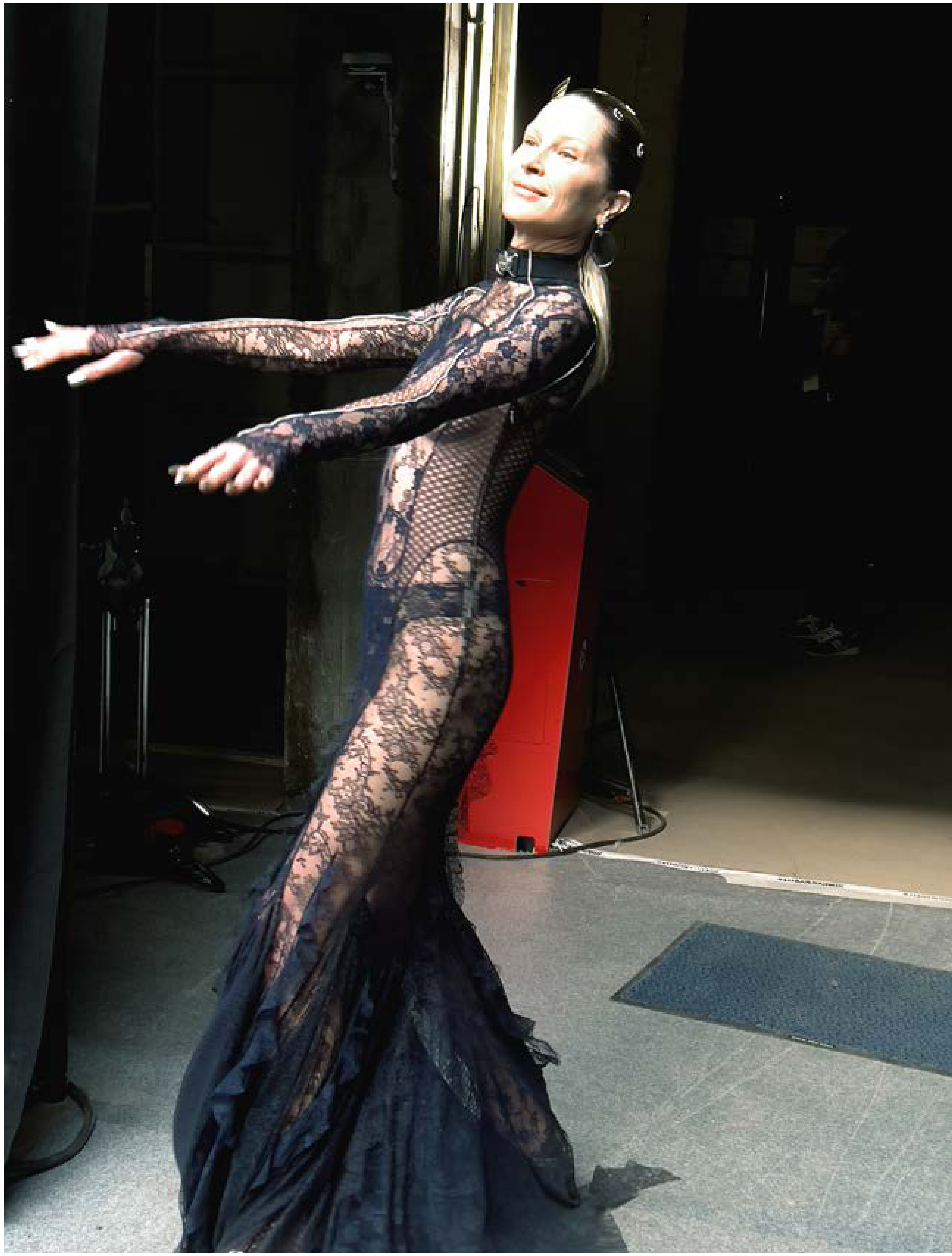
Off LA LA
PARIS!!!

OFF

PRESSE
JIMMY FAIRLY

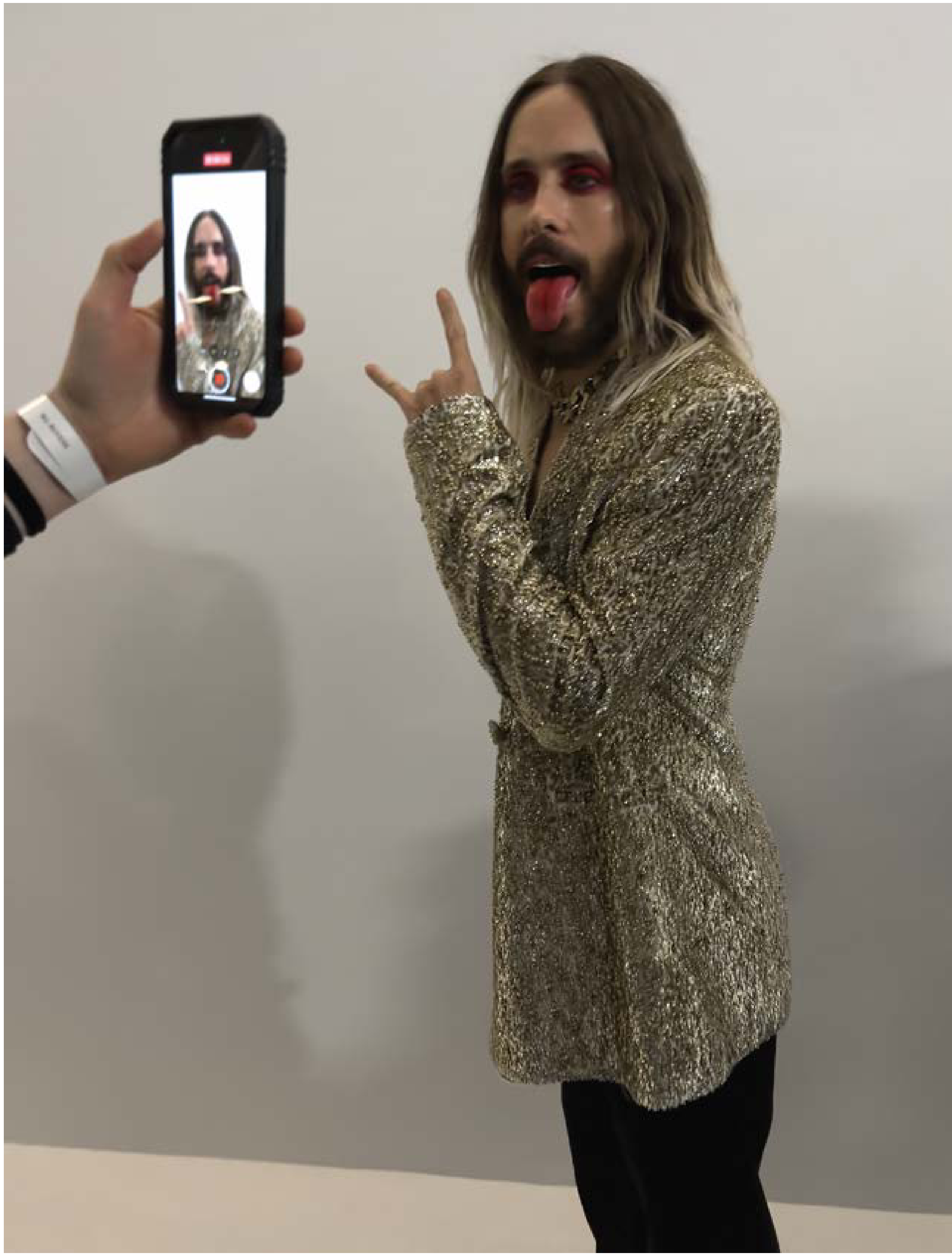
Off-White

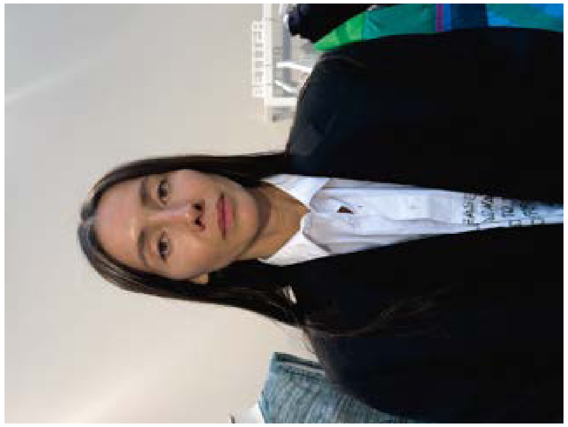
PARI

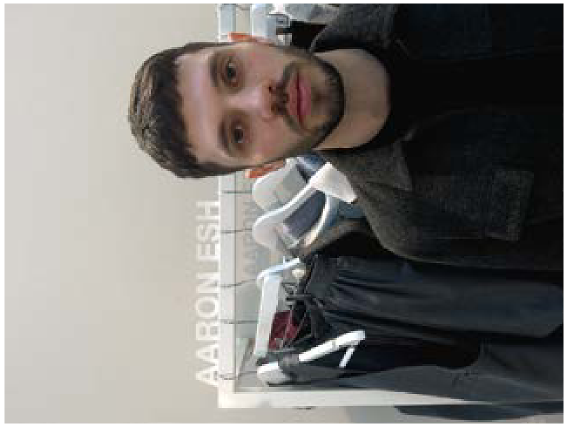


"PRIVATE"

DRESSING
UCD





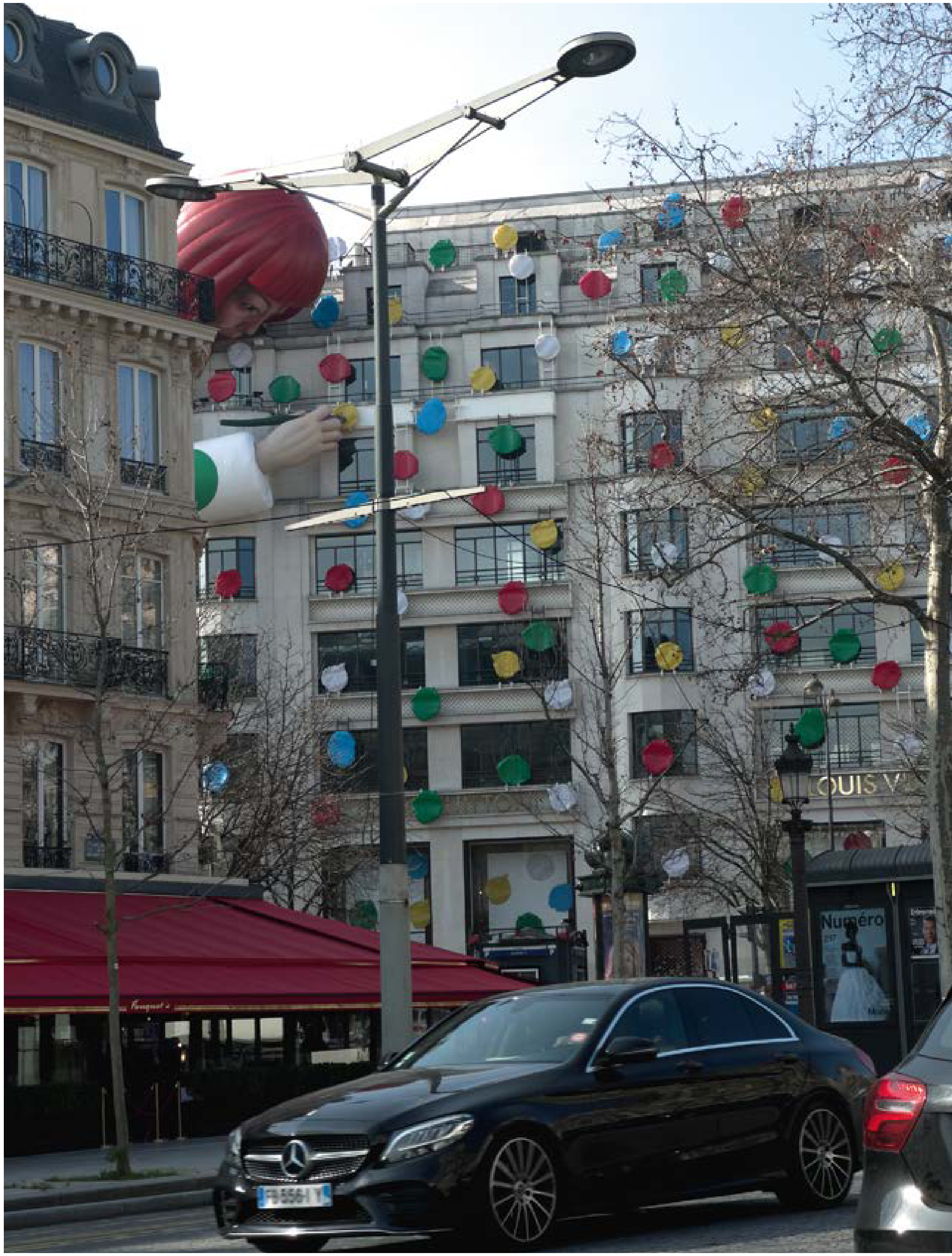

AARON ESH

LVMH PRIZE
20

STELLA McCARTNEY

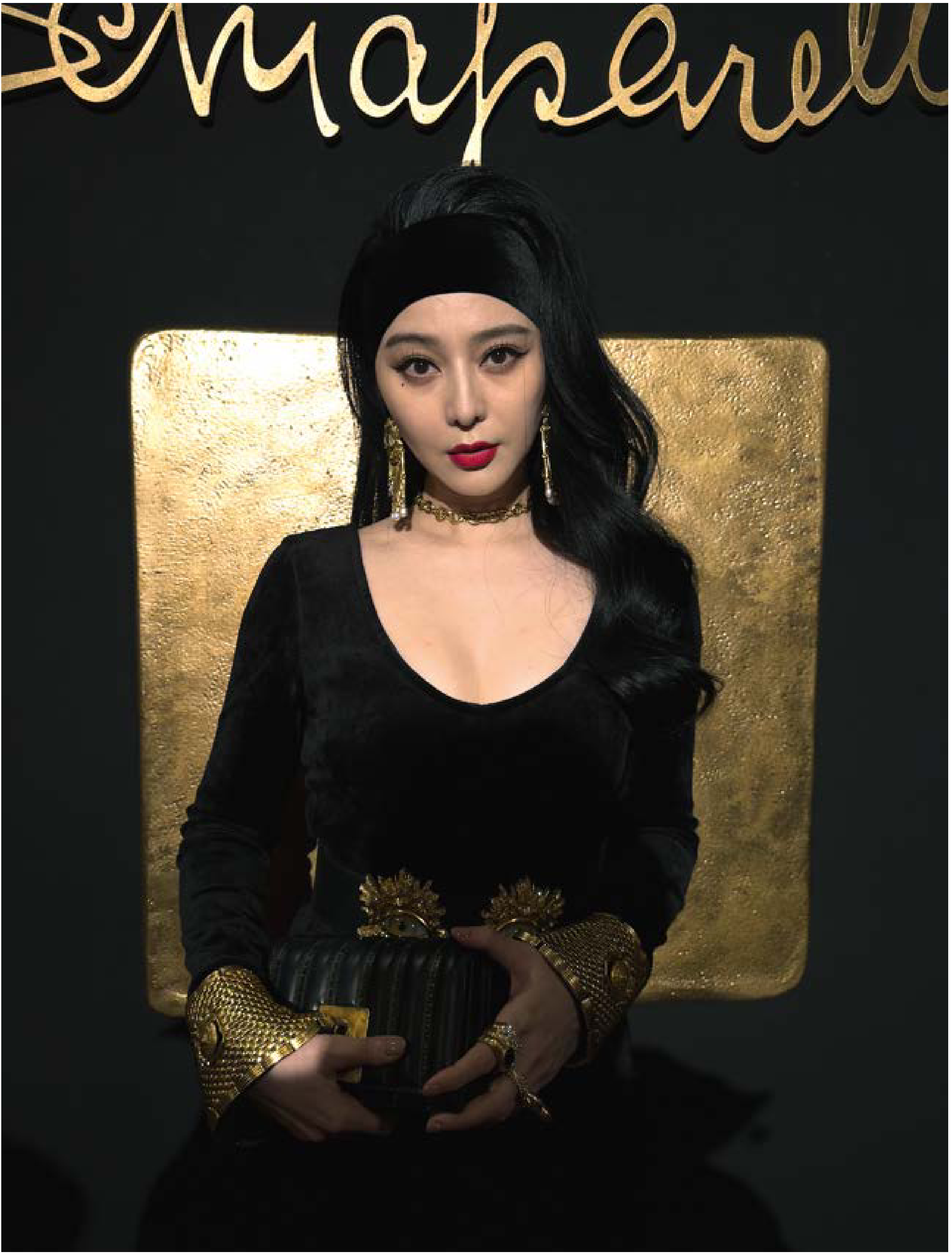
MERCI DE LES RESPECTER

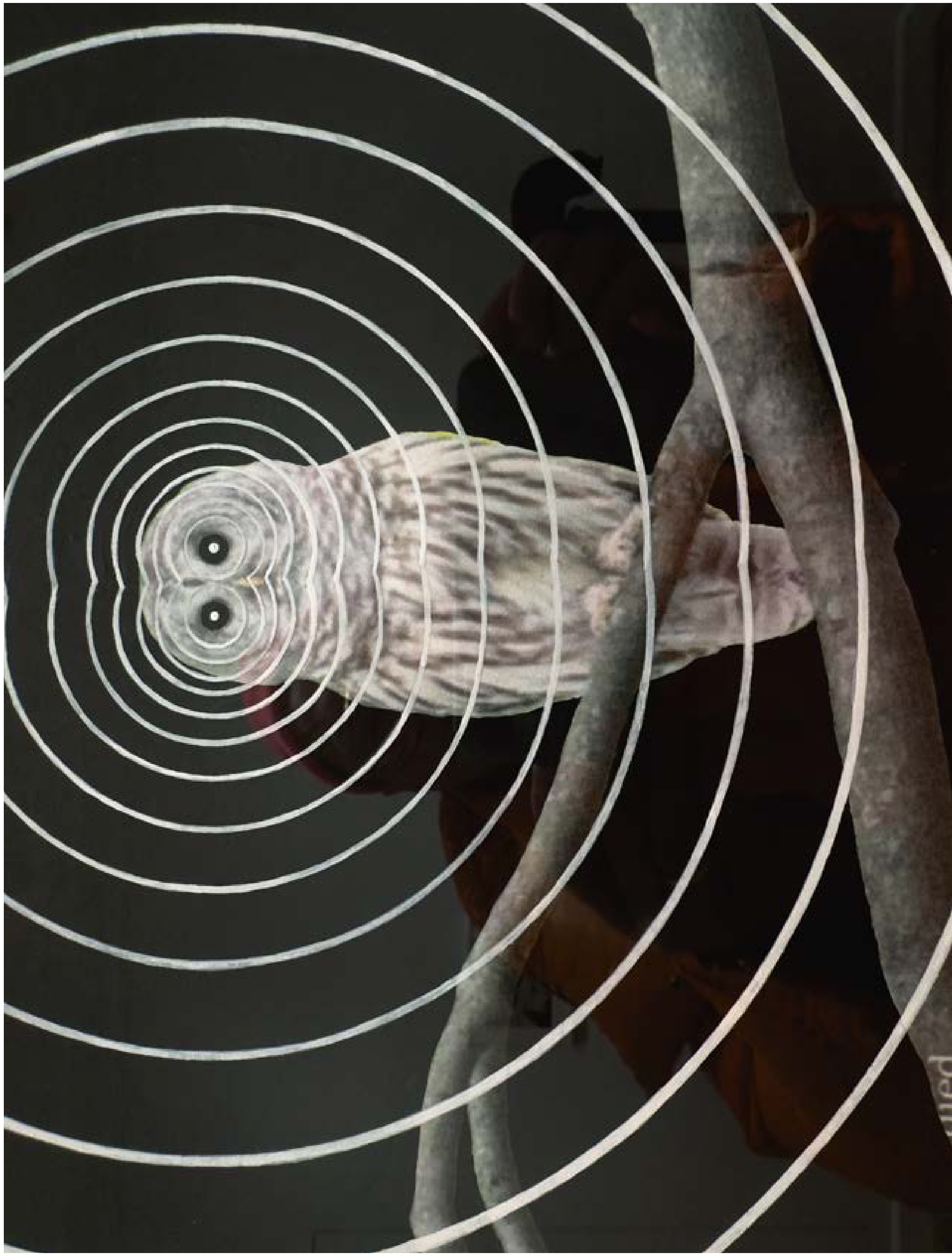
SUE ME


LOUIS V
Numéro

4e ARR
SQUARE
Ste CROIX DE LA
BRETONNERIE
E !
20

Mairie du VIIème





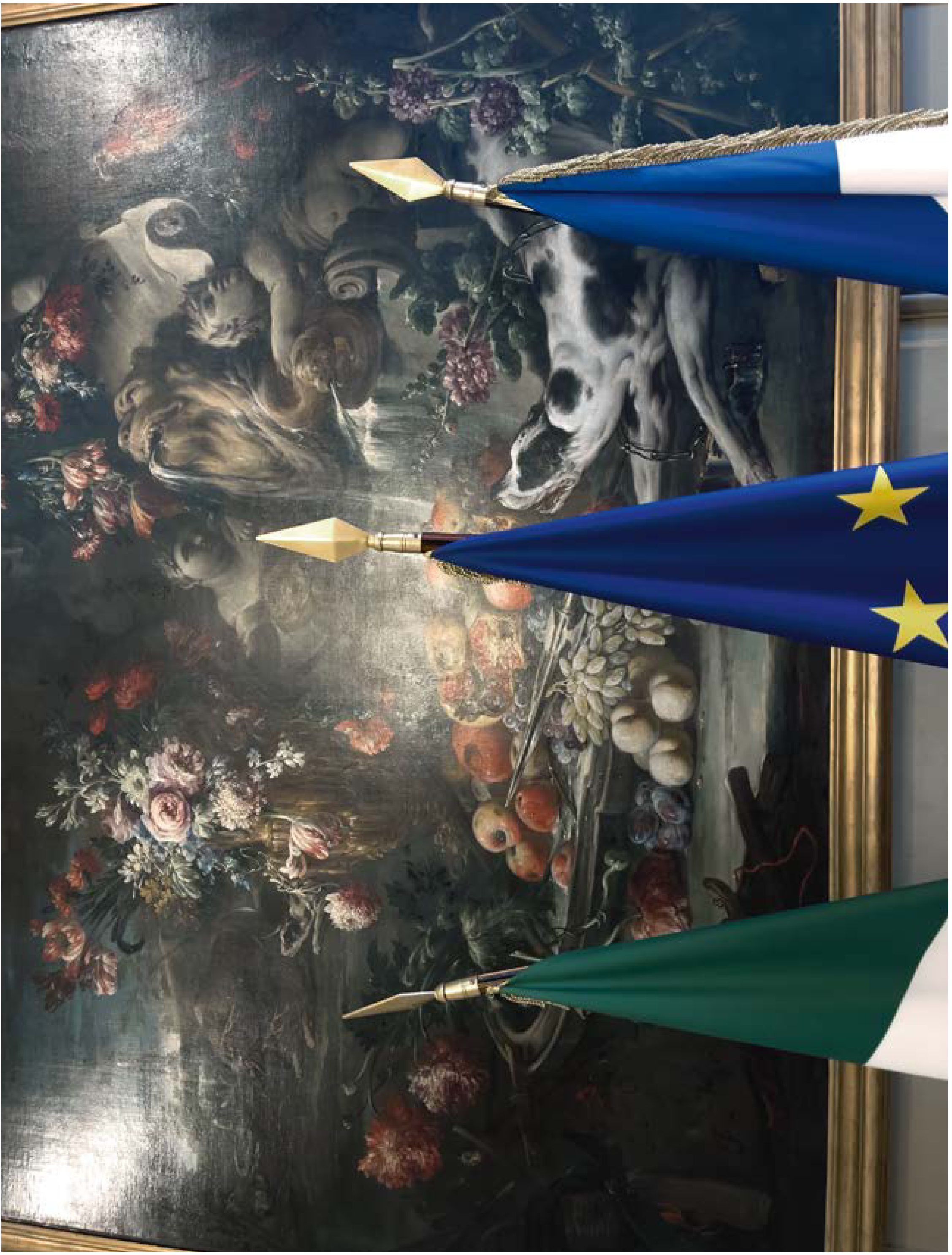
ALL AC

ISABEL
MARANT

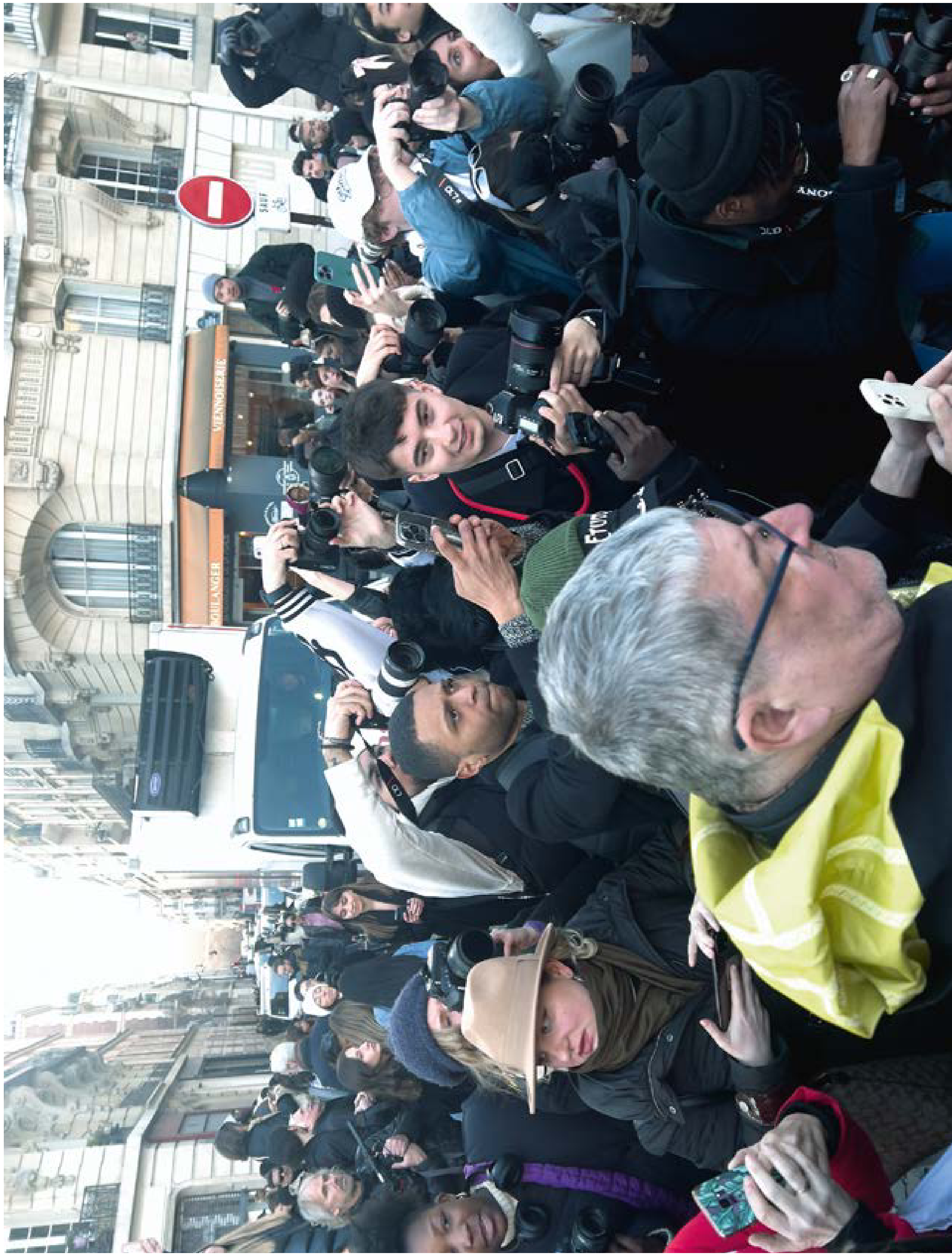
self service
"a lion doesn't concern himself with the opinion of the sheep"
a portfolio by juergen teller

LOEWE

SMITHS
MEAT IS MURDER



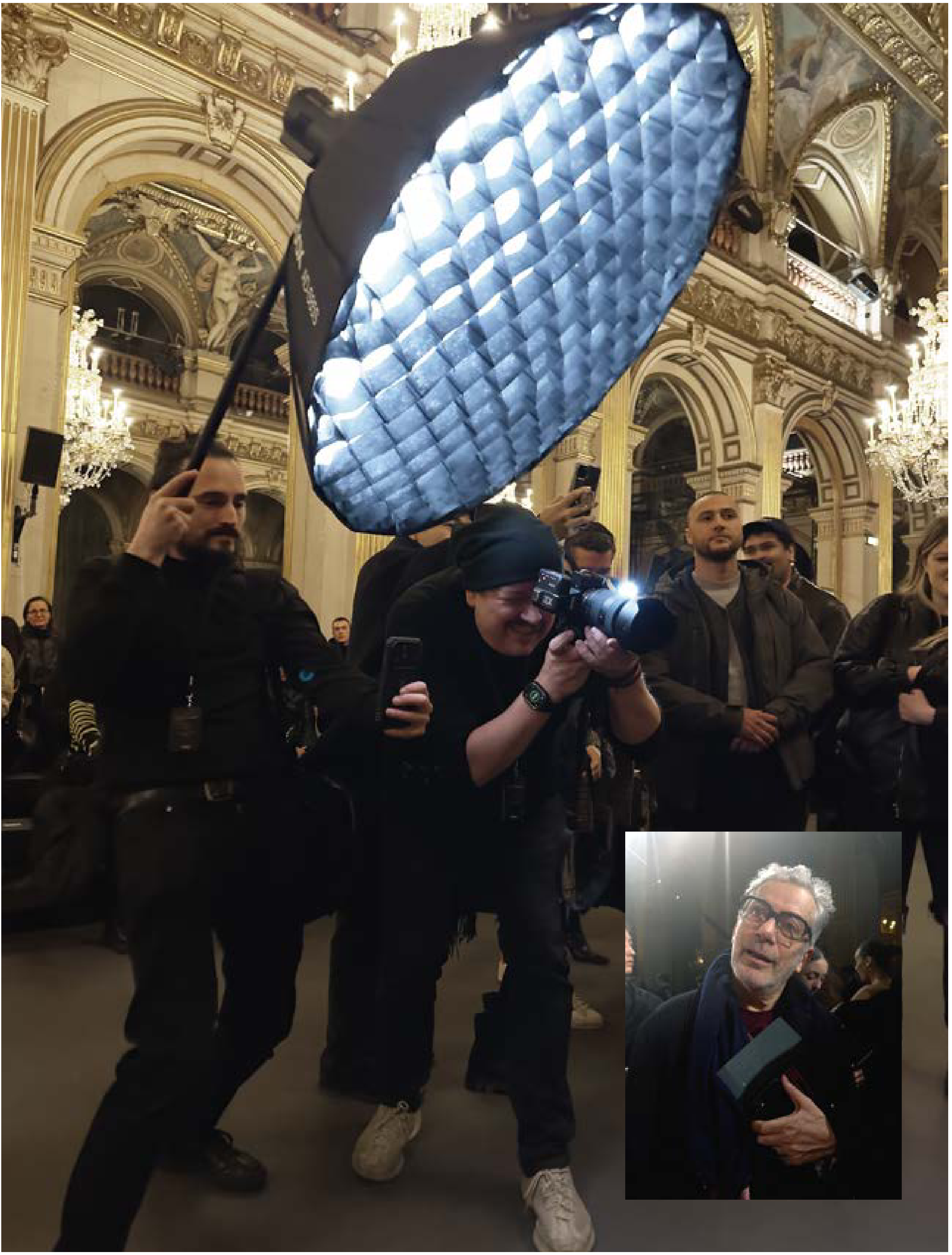
A RICCI

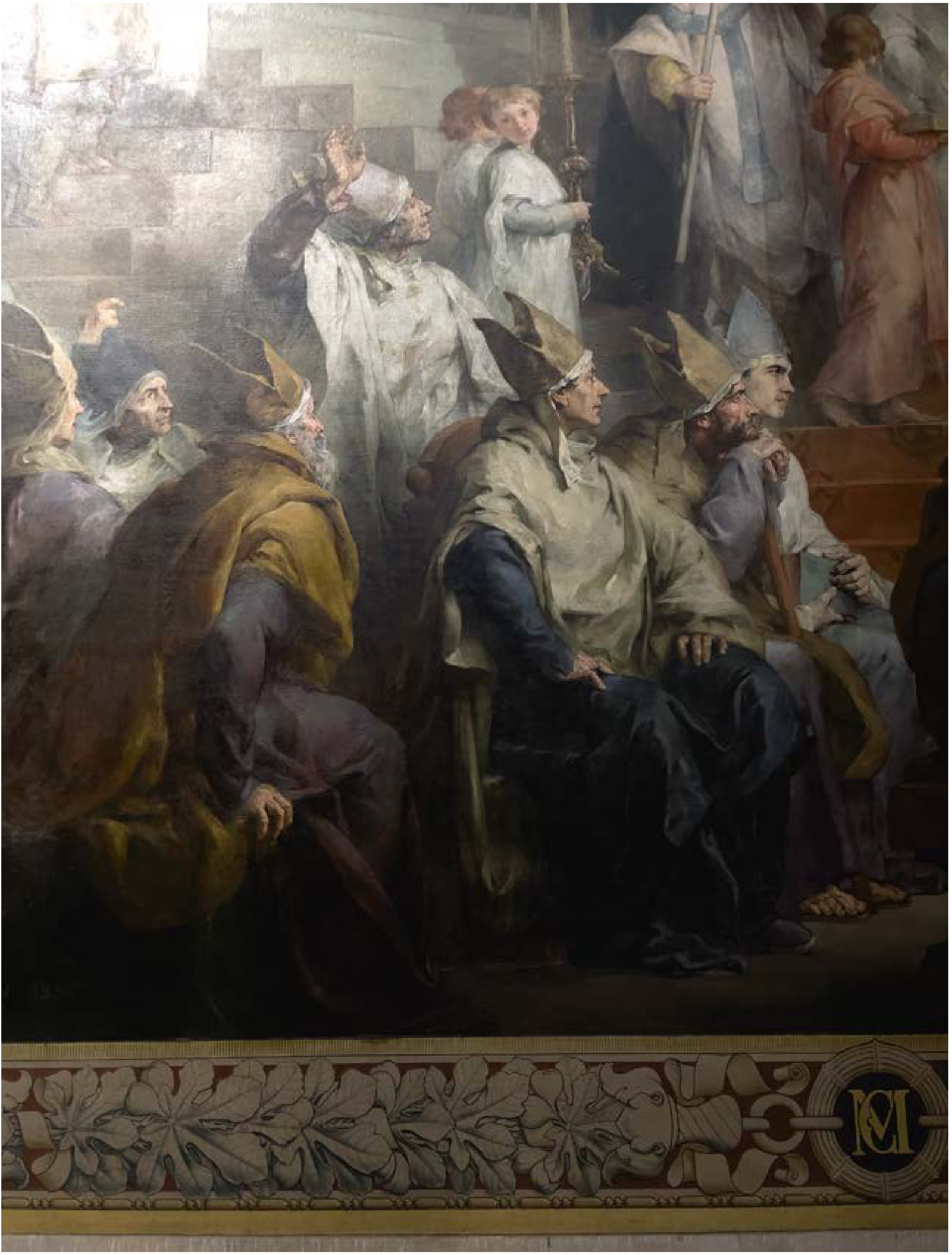


VIENNOISERIE

VOGUE

ALGERIE
VICTIMES
1854-55
MÉDECINS
DESMICHES 1854
MOREL
BROSSET 1855
CONVERS
PHARMACIENS
POULLY
GAUDISSARD
AUSTERLITZ-1805-PRUSSE-1806-7-AUTRI
VICTIMES DU TY
BENOIST
DERIVAUX
FAURE
TRATIGNON





MC

JCDecaux
CELINE

coperni

136 Saint-Honoré

mont-bell

POWER TOWER
JLG
pecolift

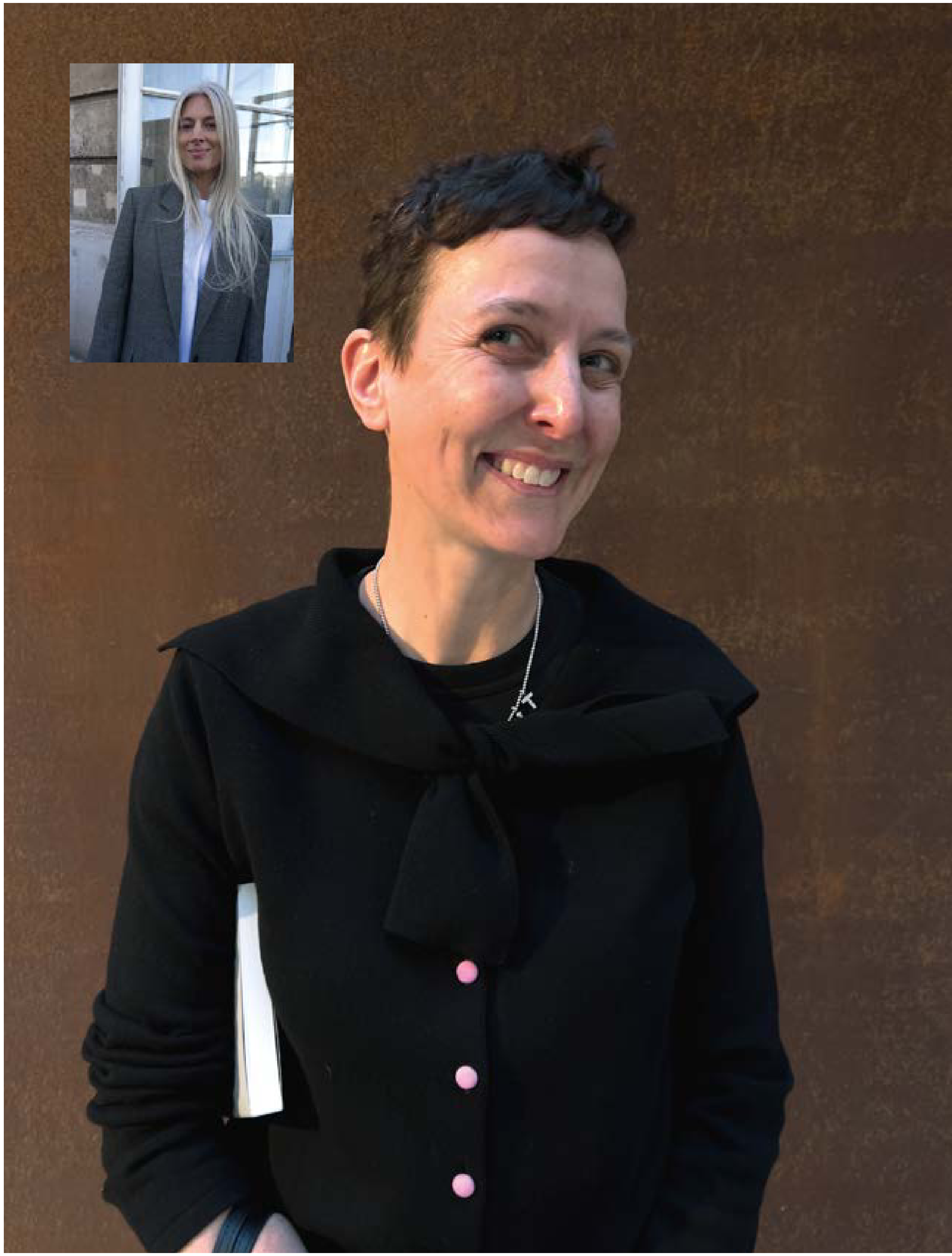
AV

PURPLE
LARS
IN BA
BY JUERGEN TELLER
ce Bercy
Menthe
Ravioli à la
Semoule, Raisins blonds, Amandes
Salade Lyonnaise, Oeuf fumé, Émulsion d'Estragon
Curry Rouge de Courge, Labneh de Tahini, Harissa
Sélection de Fromages
Ganache au Chocolat
Granité de Vermouth Blanc

Les enfants de fumeurs ont plus de risques de devenir fumeurs
3989
20
Vogue L'Originale
Bleue

SI TU ME DISAIS TA SOIF EST-CE QUE ÇA CALMERAIT LA MIENNE ?

POP
PHOTOGRAPHED B



03:57.83

WE ARE ALL
MODELS

Nikon D750
Nikon

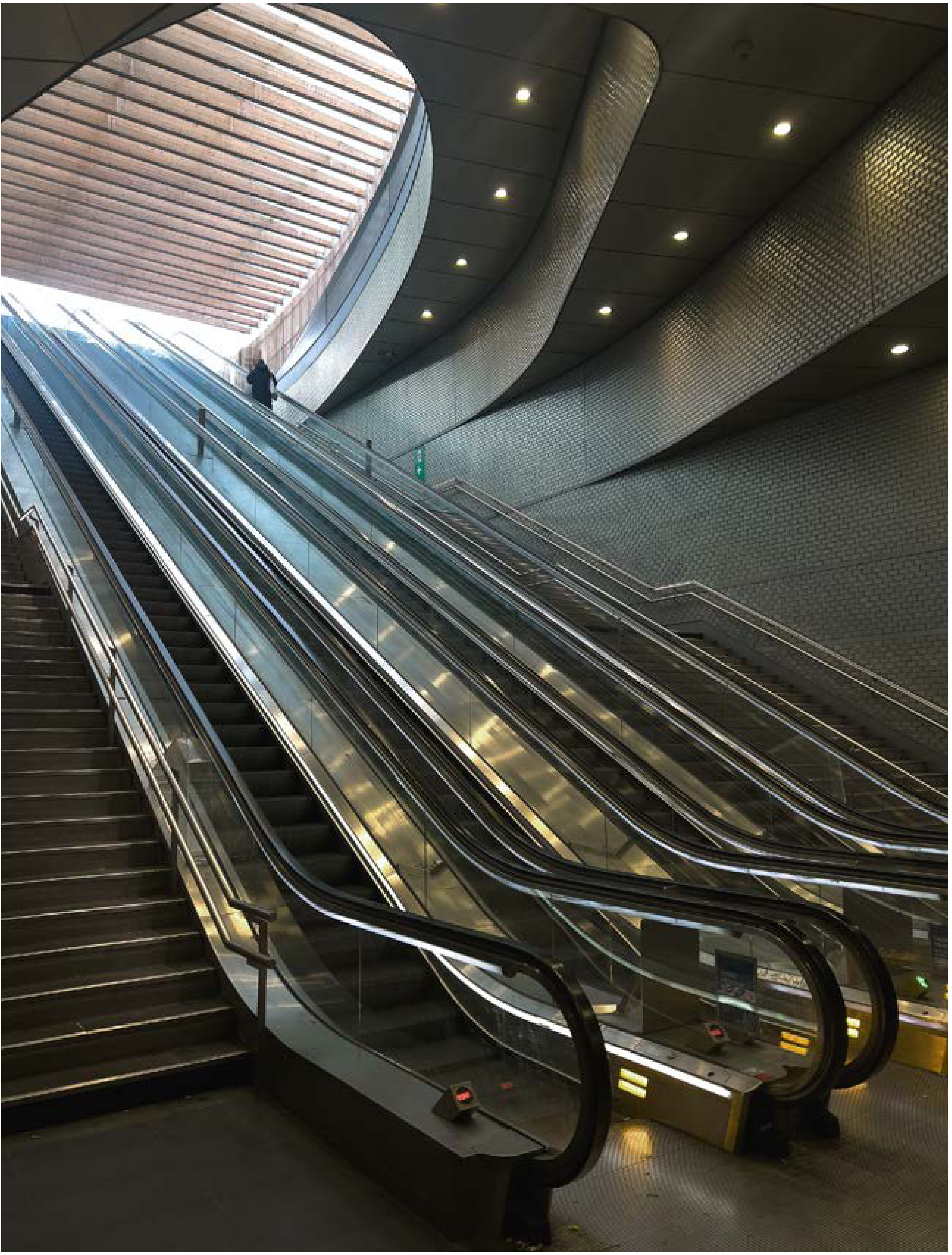
BALENCIAGA

SYNLAB
BUS

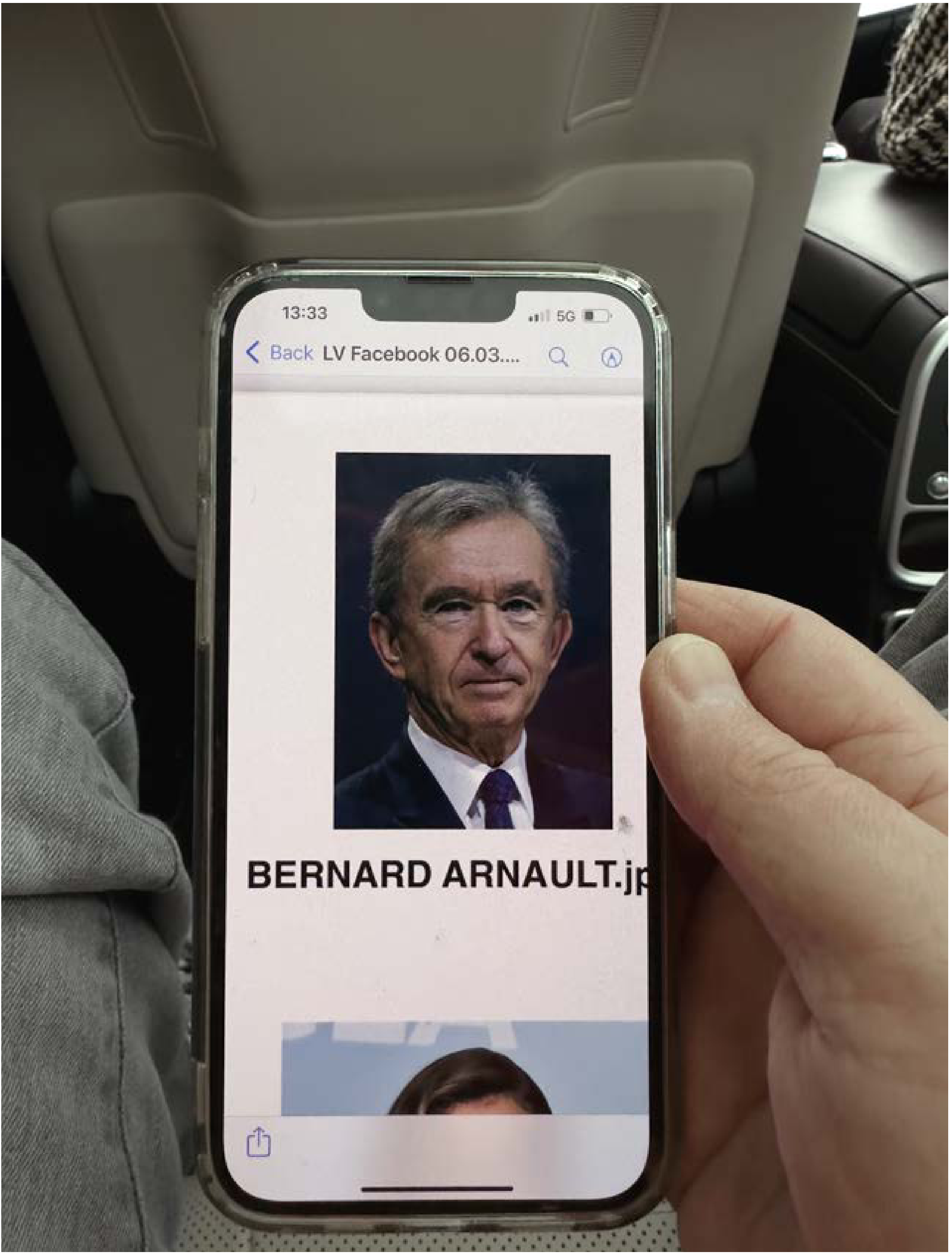
VALENTINO

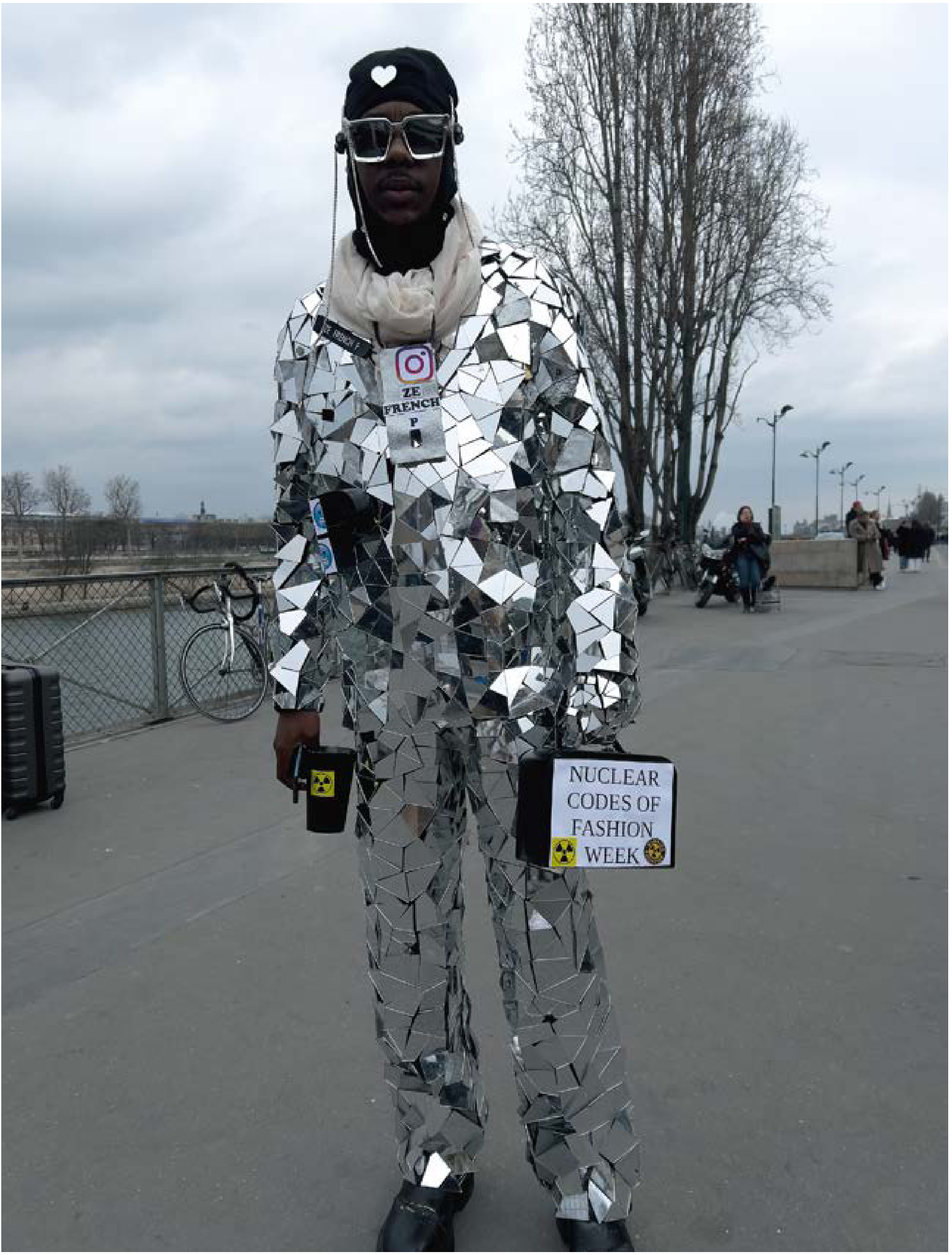
VALENTINO
~~65~~ 49
LOOK
MODEL
JACKET / GIACCA 3V0CAH35 9RR /ZQU
SUIT / ABITO
PANTS / PANTALONI
SHIRT / CAMICIA 3V0ABR35380 /W02
KNIT / MAGLIERIA
TIE / CRAVATTA 3Y0EV137BAR/0U0
SHOES / SCARPE
BAG / BORSA
NOTES / NOTE

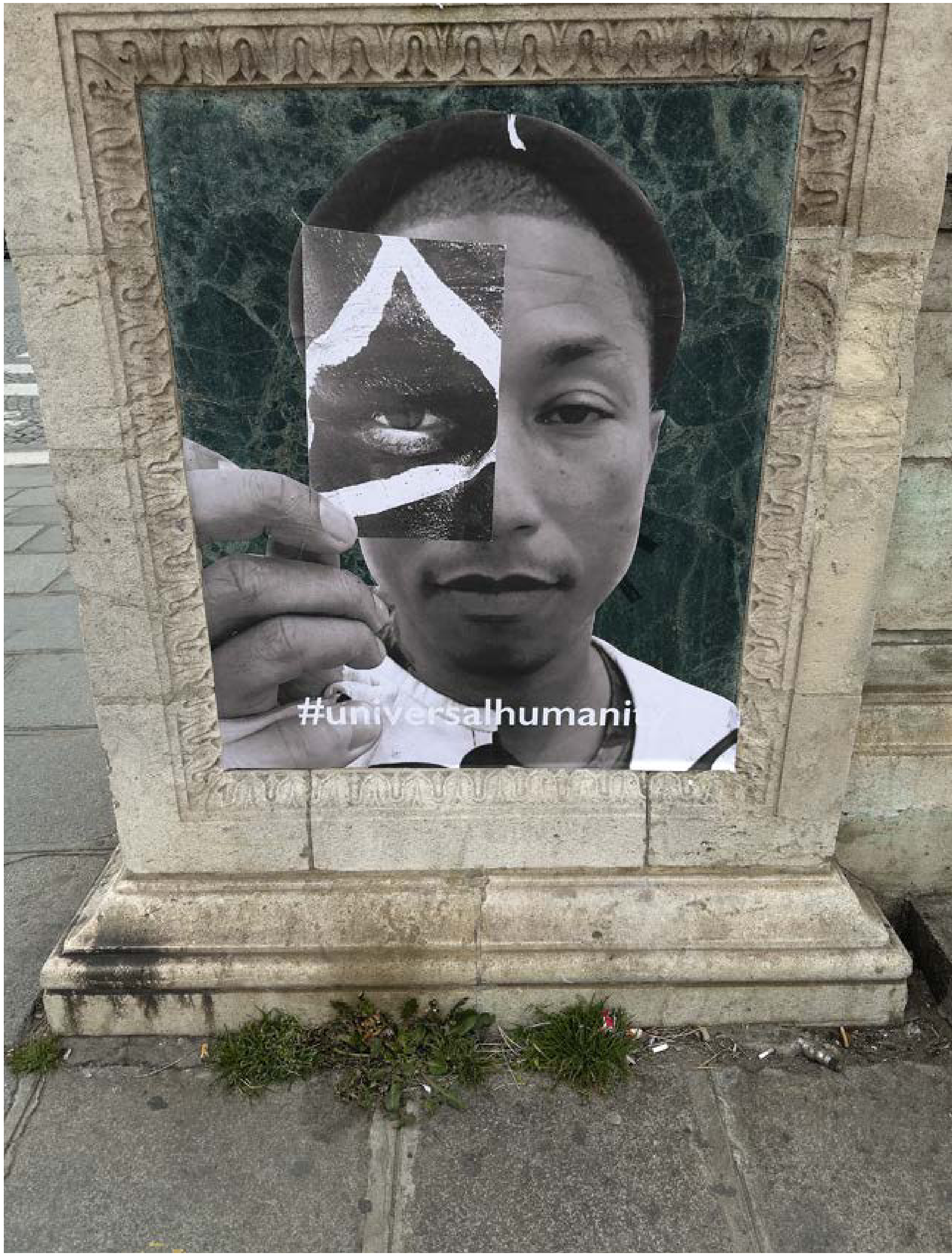
HORS

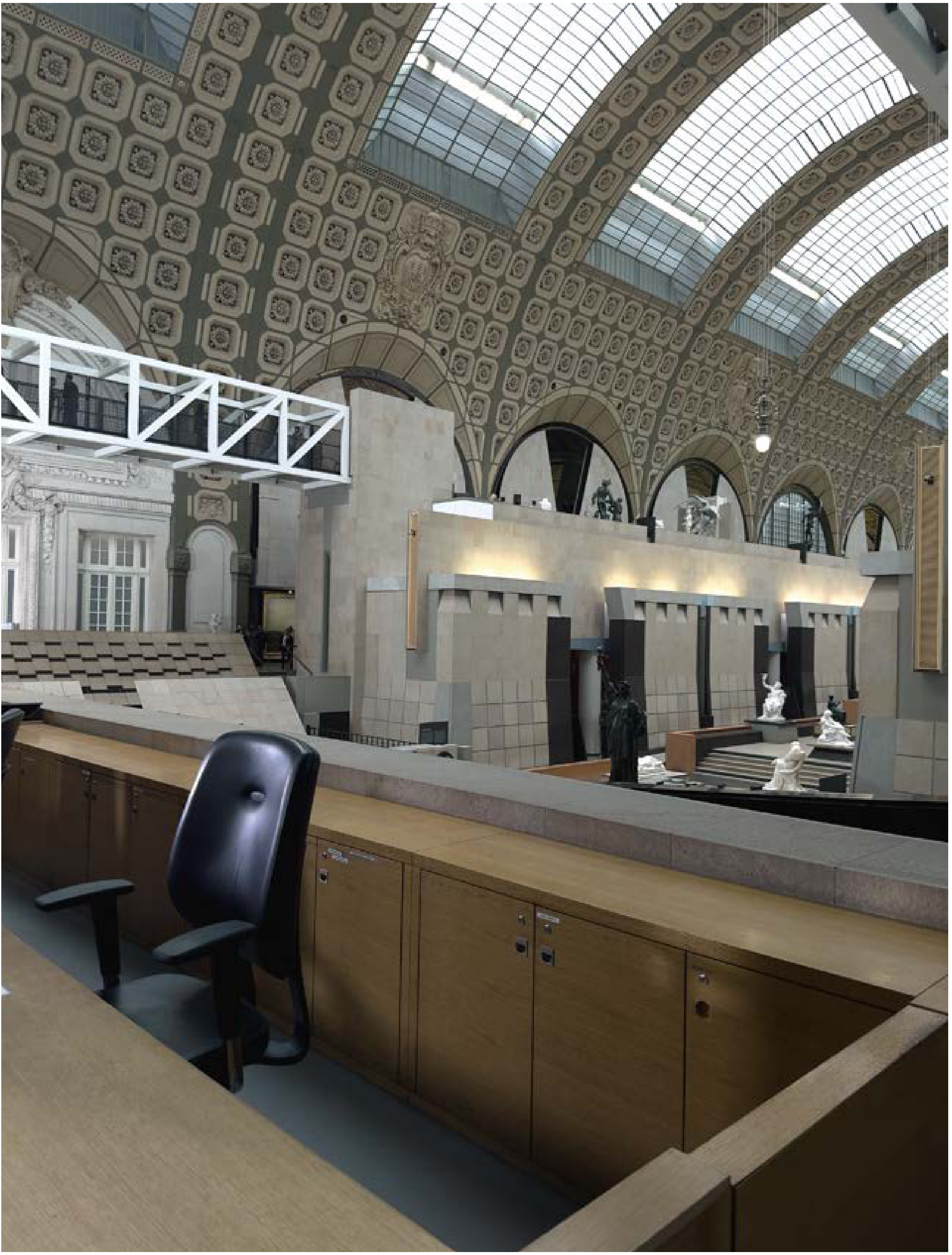


A
ENTRÉE
ENTRANCE
ENTRADA
B

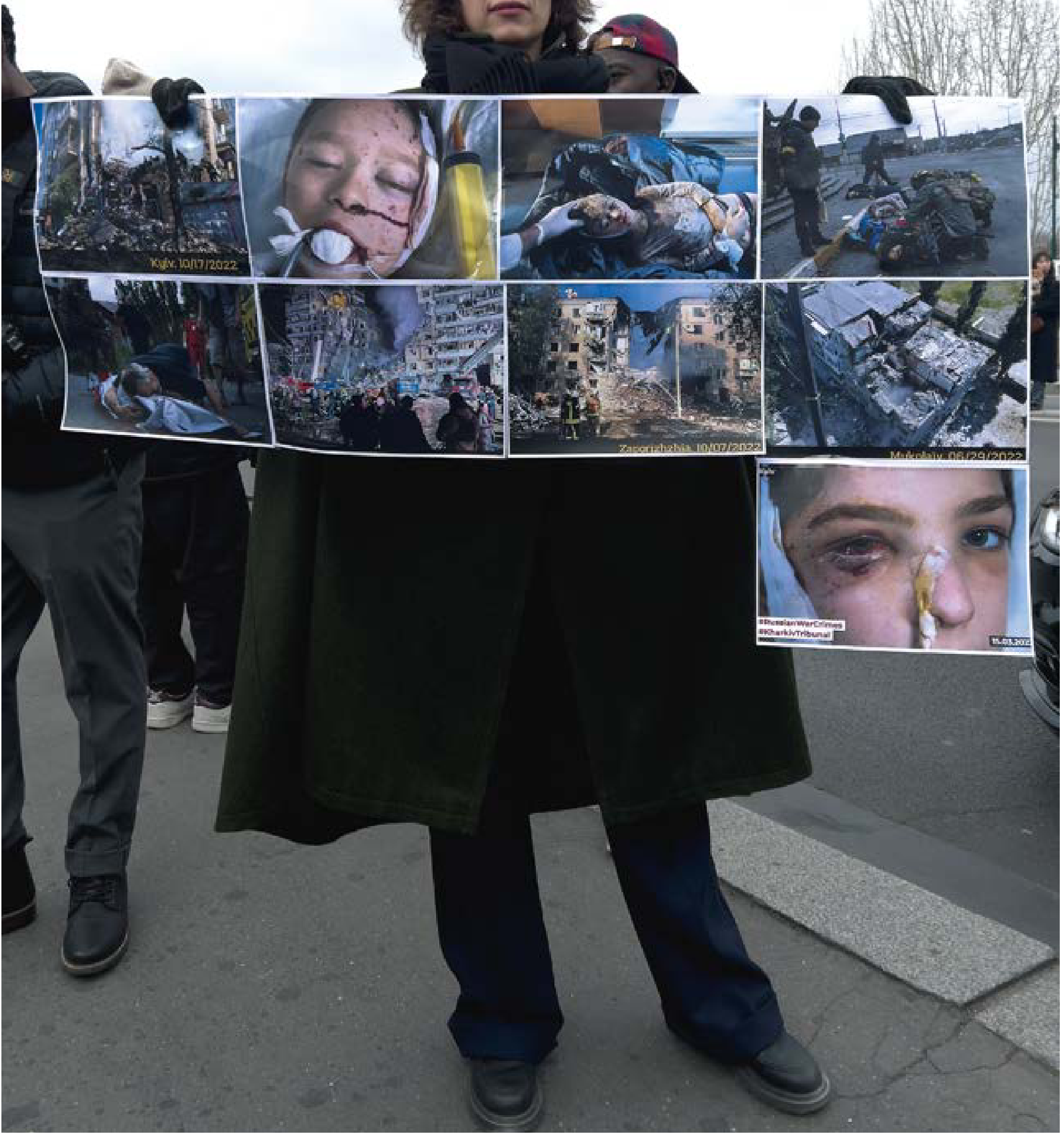

13:33
5G
Back
LV Facebook 06.03....
BERNARD ARNAULT.jp


ZE
FRENCH
P
NUCLEAR
CODES OF
FASHION
WEEK


#universalhumanit



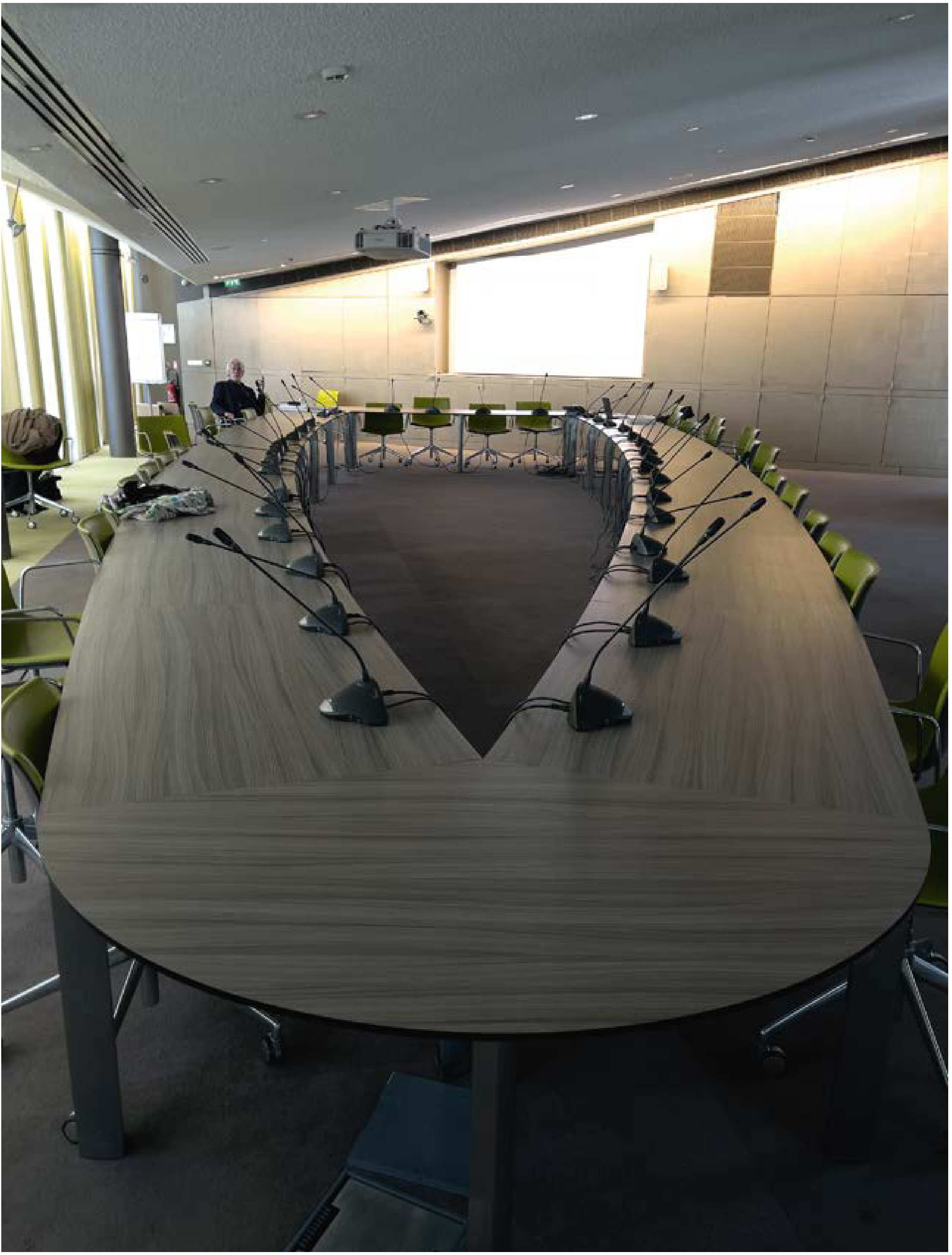
Vuitton


Kyiv. 10/17/2022
Zaporizhzhia 10/07/2022
Mykolaiv 06/29/2022
#RussianWarCrimes
#KharkivTribunal

PFW
PARIS
FASHION
WEEK
DEFI
L'ORÉAL
PARIS
100% ÉLECTRIQUE
ATTENTION
ANGLES
MORTS
PX-900-PY
F
93

GE-400-ZC

TAXIS
P



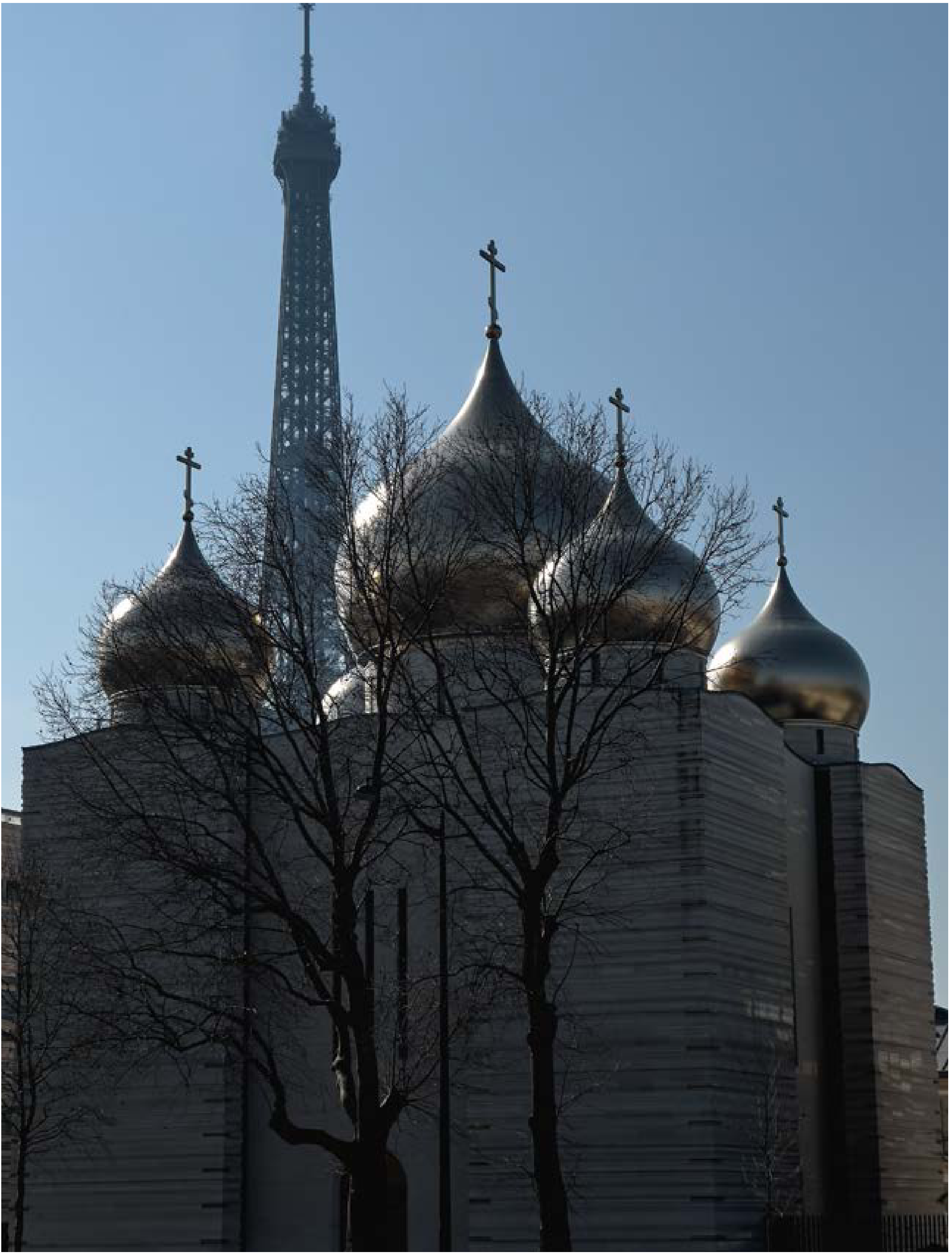
ES-699-SW
GG-444-GF
ES-992-SW
GG-444-GF

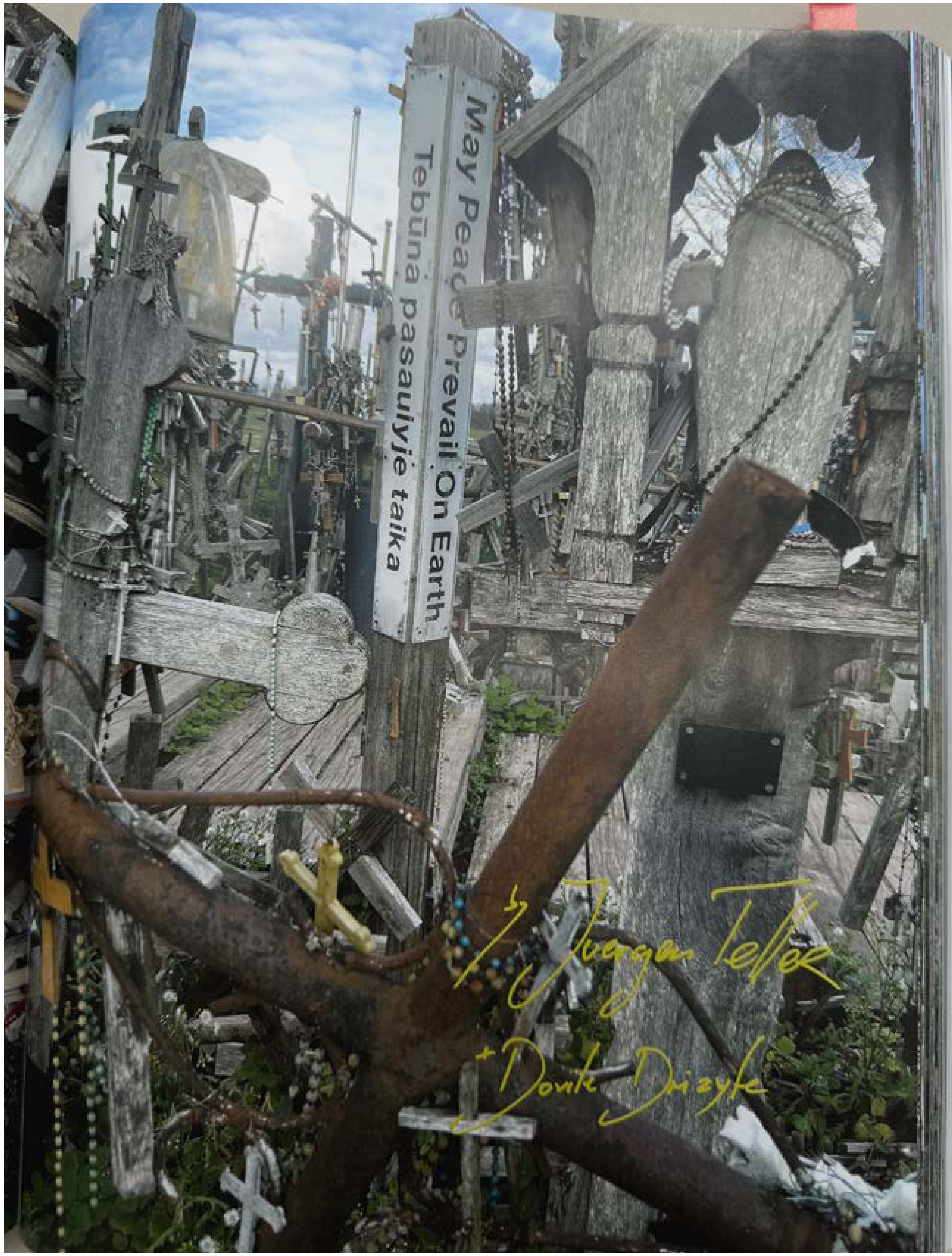
ES-696-S
GG-444-GF
ES-292-S
GG-444-GF

Google
Instagram
Instagram

With love from Paris
Dear Donald
2004
a great number
7 is even better!
Happy Birthday
love
Donald and Karl
DISNEY
KARL LAGERFELD
© Disney

CHA
CHANEL




May Peace Prevail On Earth
Tebūna pasaulyje taika
by Juergen Teller
+ Dovile Drizyte

Brut.

SAY NO
TO SHITTY
CLIENTS

MIQUE SOCIAL ET ENVIRONNEMENTAL

miu miu

BORN TO KILL

With thanks to everyone who was willing to be photographed for this portfolio.

Rossy de Palma
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Derek Blasberg
Suzy Menkes
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Etienne Russo
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Fecal Matter
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Fan Bingbing
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